



# Everything in One Place

## Emerging Strategies for Integrating Health and Housing

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The Conway Center is a project of a nonprofit housing and services organization, So Others Might Eat, and a federally qualified health center, Unity Health Care, in Washington, DC. This \$90 million community development initiative will colocate employment training, health care services, and affordable housing under one roof in Ward 7, an area of DC experiencing high poverty and unemployment, and poor health outcomes. The partnership aims to improve access to affordable rental housing, increase livable-wage job attainment, and connect residents to high-quality health care services. Although still under construction, this partnership highlights how a shared vision among community-serving organizations and funders can result in a comprehensive strategy for improving resident health and well-being.

## Introduction

The cost of living in Washington, DC, is among the highest in the country, with housing as one of its main drivers. In DC, there are only 45 affordable and available rental units for every 100 extremely low-income households (a 15 percent decrease from 2000) (Leopold et al. 2015).<sup>1</sup> In other words, more than half of households earning 30 percent or less of the area median income struggle to find a place to live. DC renters of color have an even higher housing cost burden and are more likely to use more than 30 percent of their income on rent (Hendey 2016).

Poverty and unemployment are particularly high east of the Anacostia River and quite acute in surrounding neighborhoods. Ward 7 residents also have unmet health needs, experiencing high rates of

diabetes, obesity, asthma, and depression (box 1). It is here that the Conway Center—a single building offering affordable housing units, health care facilities, and an employment training center—is being built.

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#### BOX 1

##### **Community Context: Ward 7, Washington, DC**

Population: 71,784 (more than 90 percent black)

Families living below federal poverty level: 25 percent

Unemployment rate: 22 percent

Adults without a high school diploma: 17 percent

Diabetes rate: 14.5 percent

Obesity rate: 23 percent

Asthma rate: 14.2 percent

Depression: 18.4 percent

**Sources:** “Ward 7,” NeighborhoodInfo DC, last updated March 31, 2017,

[https://www.neighborhoodinfo.org/wards/Nbr\\_prof\\_wrd7.html](https://www.neighborhoodinfo.org/wards/Nbr_prof_wrd7.html); Chaya Merrill, Linda Cottrell, and Kimberle Searcy, *District of Columbia Community Health Needs Assessment* (Washington, DC: DC Healthy Communities Collaborative, 2016).

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## **So Others Might Eat**

So Others Might Eat (SOME) began in 1970 as a group of interfaith leaders who ran a small soup kitchen. Over time, the group expanded its service offerings and became a highly regarded nonprofit community-based organization with the mission of helping poor and homeless individuals in DC. SOME currently operates a variety of charitable and supportive services supplying food and clothing, providing mental health and substance use treatment programming, and running on-site job training. Additionally, SOME has its own medical clinic for the homeless. In 1989, SOME began providing affordable housing, including 90-day residential recovery and treatment centers, as well as emergency and transitional supportive housing and over 600 units of affordable housing for families, single adults and seniors.

## **Unity Health Care Inc.**

Founded as the Health Care for the Homeless Project in 1985, Unity Health Care Inc. provides primary health care services to some of the most vulnerable residents in DC. Unity is now one of the largest primary health care networks in the District, operating 29 health care sites and serving over 100,000 patients annually. Unity functions as a federally qualified health center (FQHC), offering high-quality, affordable health care to its patients (box 2).

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## BOX 2

### Federally Qualified Health Centers

A federally qualified health center is a community-based organization receiving grants under Section 330 of the Public Health Service Act. Federally qualified health centers qualify for enhanced reimbursements from Medicare and Medicaid and must therefore serve an underserved population, offer a sliding scale fee based on patients' ability to pay, provide comprehensive services, maintain an ongoing quality assurance program, and have at least a 51 percent consumer-based board of directors, defined as current patients or their dependents or caregivers.

**Source:** "Federally Qualified Health Centers," Health Resources and Services Administration, accessed July 3, 2017, <https://www.hrsa.gov/opa/eligibilityandregistration/healthcenters/fqhc/>.

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### The Conway Center

The Conway Center grew out of a mutual need for expansion among the two key partner organizations. SOME wanted to develop 1,000 new units of rental housing and expand its employment training services. Unity wanted to increase its primary care capacity, clinical space, and services.

For its housing expansion, SOME had identified a vacant piece of land in Ward 7, across the street from Unity's east-of-the-river health center and located next to the Benning Road Metro station. The area is one of DC's poorest, most racially segregated neighborhoods, with high rates of unemployment and health problems. Given their shared mission and 30-year joint history serving the same populations, SOME approached Unity about collaboration on the building plans and began to talk to potential funders. Unity had already identified integrated human services for its patients as a priority, so this invitation came at an opportune moment.

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*Often your zip code determines your quality of health care. The colocation of health care and housing is an attempt to circumvent traditional barriers experienced by underserved communities. – Michael Crawford, Chief of Staff, Unity Health Care Inc.*

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Unity's east-of-the-river health center currently occupies a collection of three pre-engineered trailers totaling 4,779 square feet and has outgrown the facility. The new facility will increase visibility, provide a much-needed pharmacy for patients, and increase the number of available jobs in the community.

With the two organizations working together, the vision for the Conway Center started to take shape. Solely owned by SOME, the 320,000-square-foot LEED-certified building will lease some of its

space to Unity to create an entirely new health center. By colocating housing, health, and job training services in a single facility, the project promises to increase affordable housing, health care access, and living-wage jobs.

## Activities

The Conway Center will boast an innovative architectural design with a green roof (an energy-efficient vegetated rooftop), family and single-adult room occupancy rental units, a children's playground, classroom space for employment training, and a multiroom health clinic. The green infrastructure will support energy-efficient lighting, high-efficiency windows, energy-saving appliances, and low-flow bathrooms. Its proximity to a Metro station is a major perk of this transit-oriented development. The Conway Center not only provides affordable housing, it also helps its residents and employees save on transportation costs.

FIGURE 1

Main Rendering of the Conway Center



Source: Wiencek + Associates Architects + Planners.

## Affordable Housing

Apartments at the Conway Center include options for families, single adults, and elderly residents. There are 30 units for families, including two-, three-, and four-bedroom options. For single adults, there are 76 efficiency units (with 16 designated for seniors) that have a private kitchen and bathroom. There are also 72 single-room-occupancy units that have shared bathroom, kitchen, and lounge space. All single adult residents will have access to the community room, computer lab, and private outdoor space. Families will have their own distinct community space, computer lab, teen room, and outdoor space.

The units are subsidized by the DC Housing Authority's Local Rent Supplement Program and are available to individuals and families earning up to 30 percent of area median income. Residents will pay 30 percent of their income toward rent. (Income includes earned wages and other income benefits such as social security and disability.) On average, families will pay \$250 per month and single adults will pay \$170 per month. The center will require that individuals with a history of substance use issues or related program treatment demonstrate six months of sobriety before becoming a resident. Community living guidelines in the lease will require residents to honor the drug- and alcohol-free culture and avoid disruptive behavior in the facility. Finally, to be accepted as a resident, individuals cannot have any violent crime charges on their criminal record within the past year.

## Health Care

After conducting a comprehensive market assessment to ascertain how best to meet the community's health care needs, Unity designed a 37,000-square foot facility to be integrated into the Conway Center. On the first floor, Unity will have 43 exam rooms, 12 exam rooms in the walk-in clinic, and operate a pharmacy, lab, and wellness space. SOME will also operate a substance abuse program. The second floor will have six dental operatories, administrative space, and a call center. The new health center will increase Unity's capacity to serve the residents of Ward 7 and surrounding communities. Through the Conway Center alone, Unity anticipates generating over 58,000 medical visits per year.

## Job Training

SOME already operates a licensed postsecondary vocational institution through its Center for Employment Training (CET). The CET provides six- or nine-month programs for unemployed and underemployed people to receive training and long-term exposure to job experience. Training is offered in the fields of medical administrative assistant; medical assistant; electronic health records specialist; heating, ventilation, and air conditioning; and building maintenance service technician. Industry training includes basic education, soft skill development, and employment readiness, preparedness, and placement. All students receive 80 to 100 hours of hands-on externship placement and sit for their respective industry occupational credential. Additionally, participants receive \$80 per month in transportation support through the Smart Benefits program.<sup>2</sup> Postemployment, graduates continue case management to assist with employment retention and develop an individualized career pathway plan.

The goal of the CET program is for trainees to secure a job that pays at least \$15 an hour with benefits and maintain employment for a minimum of one year. CET has already placed some of its trainees with subcontractors working on the Conway Center to earn a wage and gain job skills in electric, plumbing, and concrete trades. The expectation is that these trainees will obtain living-wage employment elsewhere once construction on the Conway Center is completed.

## Funding

By increasing awareness of DC's affordable housing crisis, SOME has been able to raise substantial funds to finance the Conway Center. This includes \$20 million in gifts and pledges, \$10 million of which came from a single donor, William Conway Jr., for whom the center is named. To support the total estimated \$90 million development cost, a variety of housing investment tools were also used, including the Low-Income Housing Tax Credit program, US Department of Housing and Urban Development-insured tax-exempt bonds, the DC Department of Housing and Community Development Housing Production Trust Fund, New Market Tax Credit program, and the Healthy Futures Fund (box 3). Additionally, the Morris and Gwendolyn Cafritz Foundation has promised to contribute \$2 for every \$1 raised through SOME's *Building Hope Capital Campaign* to secure the remaining \$1 million in project costs.

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### BOX 3

#### Healthy Futures Fund

Healthy Futures Fund was established to address the connections between poor health outcomes and neighborhood disadvantage. Founding partners include Local Initiatives Support Corporation, a nonprofit community development financing institution; the for-profit investment bank Morgan Stanley; and The Kresge Foundation. This \$200 million fund primarily leverages New Market and Low-Income Housing Tax Credits as well as grant and loan capital to cultivate community development projects that combine housing and health services. Bringing together the two tax credit programs increases the financial efficiency of the fund and its funded projects, particularly for investors more used to the real-estate-based transactions through Low-Income Housing Tax Credits. Healthy Futures invested \$14 million to finance the Conway Center's health center, one of five such investments made by the fund during that round of funding.

**Source:** New Markets Support Company, Healthy Future's Fund.

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## Evaluating Success

In properties similar to the Conway Center, the average length of stay for SOME housing clients (single adults and families) is four years. Over 90 percent of individual clients maintain their housing for at least one year or move into a more independent option. Family residents likely maintain housing for even

longer, but family units are newer within SOME's portfolio and retention data therefore are more limited. SOME sees affordable housing as a platform for other stabilizing services, aiming for self-sufficiency and homeownership in seven years.

Although Conway Center residents will not be required to use the clinic or the employment and training opportunities, the partnership plans to ask residents about their engagement with these services to assess the impact of colocating the health, housing, and employment services. The partners recognize that they will need to think creatively about how to monitor the integrated services, given confidentiality requirements and patient privacy protections. Unity currently has an electronic health records system that allows the organization to track health quality measures. Core metrics include rates of hypertension, diabetes, colorectal screenings, and smoking cessation. SOME is also looking at housing stability measures, including whether an individual has maintained their housing for a year or moved into a more independent option. At this early stage, the partners have not yet finalized a data sharing agreement.

## Looking Forward

The Conway Center is slated to open at the end of 2017. Although SOME is short of its fundraising goal at the time of this writing, it is confident that it will secure the necessary funds. Not surprisingly, a few preconstruction issues have caused frustration. For example, the Conway Center sits on prime real estate next to an easy-access public transit system. Unfortunately, the permitting and regulatory processes required by the Washington Area Metropolitan Transit Authority proved to be more challenging than the partners anticipated. Additionally, although it was a straightforward process to buy the land from a single owner, the primary zoning and environmental impact studies required considerable legal research.

On the health side, Unity had to apply for a certificate of need because the project exceeds the \$2.5 million capital expenditure threshold stipulated by the local government. A certificate of need is a comprehensive business plan for review by the DC Department of Health. Despite being a network of federally qualified health centers, Unity must go through an extensive application process that outlines how the new health center located at the Conway Center will provide an added benefit for its community, how it will increase access to health and meet facility standards, as well as provide additional social services.

Based on their positive experiences with the Conway Center, SOME and Unity plan to pursue a similar colocation approach with a different population. Although the partners are just in initial design conversations, they have already identified a site and are putting together the programmatic model for their next collaboration.

## Key Take-Aways

The Conway Center is still in its nascent stages, yet this case study points to the promise of colocating health and housing services in a high-need neighborhood by leveraging trust and capital in new ways.

- **Colocating services.** Bringing health services together with housing and employment training near public transportation recognizes the multiple challenges that prevent some individuals and families from accessing health care. This place-based approach to serving vulnerable populations reduces the barriers associated with care coordination. Given the high rates of chronic disease in the surrounding community, improving access to primary care services may promote better health management and reduce the need for acute-care services.
- **Leveraging capital designed to encourage cross-sector service collaboration.** Working with the Local Initiatives Support Corporation allowed this partnership to access Healthy Futures Fund investment. In addition to its attractive funding structure, Healthy Futures Fund offers readiness programs to community development organizations that are thinking creatively about embedding health and housing in their projects. Recipients have access to technical assistance programs, project planning, and relationship building with potential funders.
- **Building on existing relationships.** Leaders at both SOME and Unity had already been looking for ways to collaborate more formally, given the overlap in the communities they serve. Without having to build trust and establish a new relationship, both entities came to the table with a similar philosophy about how to serve their clients. They had an aligned mission, vision, and values that informed their proposed work, which has positioned them to contemplate scaling the model in other locations and build in features such as the on-site pharmacy and wellness space that can help anchor the project in the community and improve sustainability.

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### BOX 4

#### Want to Learn More?

For further information regarding the Conway Center case study, please contact Troy Swanda at [tswanda@urban.org](mailto:tswanda@urban.org) or Michael Crawford at [mcrawford@unityhealthcare.org](mailto:mcrawford@unityhealthcare.org).

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## Notes

1. See “Mapping America’s Rental Housing Crisis,” Urban Institute, accessed June 23, 2017, <http://www.urban.org/mapping-americas-rental-housing-crisis>.

2. SmartBenefits® is a commuting benefit that offers a direct employee benefit, pre-tax deduction, or a combination of both to employees throughout the D.C. metropolitan region. See “SmartBenefits,” Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority, accessed June 23, 2017, <https://www.wmata.com/about/business/smartbenefits/>.

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## About the Authors



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