

# Affordable Housing in Southern California

*A Catholic System Works with Others to Provide Homes for Very Low-Income People*

**BY MAYA DUNNE**

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**T**HE MISSION of St. Joseph Health System (SJHS), Orange, CA, is to “extend the Catholic health care ministry of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Orange, by continually improving the health and quality of life of people in the communities we serve.” A health care system with 14 hospitals in California and west Texas, SJHS is strongly committed to acting as an advocate for the housing needs of lower-income residents. Over the past six years, we have engaged hospital leaders, employees, and community members in a struggle for affordable housing in the communities we serve.

We began our work in 1996 by asking ourselves some difficult questions:

- Were the SJHS mission and vision dedicated only to providing health care services for the poor and vulnerable, as well as the general population, or did the mission and vision extend to efforts designed to improve quality of life?
- Why were parts of the community in poor health? Did this have something to do with prevailing social and economic systems?
- Could SJHS extend its mission to address deep societal issues? How would our mission compel us to address these issues?

## **THE HEALTHY COMMUNITIES MOVEMENT**

In 1994 a group of hospital leaders, including members of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Orange, SJHS’s sponsoring congregation, became involved in a nationwide group called the Healthy Cities and Communities Coalition. This organization began to explore ways in which its members might improve the quality of life in their communities. As a result of their participation in the coalition, SJHS’s leaders began a careful consideration of the system’s influence in its communities and the ways this influence might be used to effect social change.

SJHS members began to meet as a Healthy Communities roundtable to design programmatic responses. In 1998 the roundtable group hosted a “Healthy Communities Summit” in Orange. The meeting brought together health care executives, board members, and community leaders. At the end of the two-day meeting, each hospital executive present made a commitment to begin

working to improve some local quality-of-life situation—involving better nutrition, for example, or affordable housing, or cleaner water, or improved education. The leaders of St. Joseph Hospital, Orange, CA, and SJHS's corporate office decided to partner in an effort to increase affordable housing in Orange County.

### AFFORDABLE HOUSING DEVELOPMENTS

In 1997, SJHS's leaders initiated conversations concerning affordable housing with Mercy Housing, Denver, a national, faith-based, not-for-profit organization. A year later, SJHS agreed to join Mercy Housing and six other Catholic health care systems in creating the Strategic Health Care Partnership, an investment pool designed to bring affordable housing to the most vulnerable (See Sr. Lillian Murphy, RSM, "Allying Health Care and Housing," p. 17). SJHS invested \$5 million in the pool. The commitment has recently been renewed for a second five-year term.

SJHS has three hospitals in Orange County. To better understand that community's needs, the system's leaders conducted conversations with key local stakeholders and collected data about the county. Although many Americans think of Orange County as a wealthy enclave, a significant portion of the county's population could be considered "working poor." Rent for a two-bedroom apartment in the county is now nearly \$1,400 a month and the apartment vacancy rate is only 3 percent. As a result, an increasing number of the county's families are homeless.



Casa Alegre for people with HIV/AIDS

Armed with data and a clear vision of the goal it wished to achieve, SJHS began by identifying the Orange County cities most in need of housing for low-income people. Anaheim was one of those selected. Home to Disneyland, Angels baseball, and the Mighty Ducks hockey team, Anaheim is a rapidly growing city in need of new low-income housing units.

In 1999, SJHS's leaders began to work with Mercy Housing to identify sites for family housing. Mercy Housing was approved to construct Linbrook Court, an 81-unit development for senior citizens with very limited income. As with all affordable rentals today, financing was needed. This was provided by a variety of sources, including banks, the city government, and SJHS. Two years later, Mercy Housing secured another site and on it built Casa Alegre, a 23-unit development for formerly homeless people with HIV/AIDS. Great joy accompanied the opening of these units. SJHS's leaders were especially

## SUMMARY

St. Joseph Health System (SJHS), Orange, CA, has been committed since the mid-1990s to acting as an advocate for the housing needs of low-income people. In 1997, for example, SJHS became a founder, with Mercy Housing and six other Catholic health care organizations, in creating the Strategic Health Care Partnership, an investment pool designed to bring affordable housing to the most vulnerable.

In 1999, SJHS supported Mercy Housing's construction of an 81-unit development for very limited-income senior citizens in Orange County, CA. Two years later, SJHS supported

Mercy Housing's creation of a 23-unit development in the county for homeless people with HIV/AIDS.

In the same year, SJHS and other local groups formed the Kennedy Commission, a group devoted to improving housing in Orange County. Just last spring, the commission persuaded the city council of Anaheim, CA, to vote unanimously for an ordinance that would offer incentives to developers who set aside portions of their housing projects for low-income renters.



Linbrook Court for seniors

proud, because they knew that the developments' residents would be healthier and would enjoy a higher quality of life.

#### THE KENNEDY COMMISSION

Meanwhile, in 1999, SJHS leaders were invited to meet with other Orange County groups to discuss local housing needs. After a series of informal get-togethers, the participants decided to form an advocacy collaborative, the Kennedy Commission, named for a local human rights advocate. The commission comprises representatives of not-for-profit health care providers, service providers, providers of care for homeless people, community organizing groups, for-profit and not-for-profit developers, local banks, and others. Its mission is to increase housing production for Orange County residents who earn less than \$10 an hour. SJHS has participated in the commission's work by:

- Supporting developments such as Linbrook Court and Casa Alegre
- Supporting land-use reform and financing efforts to increase affordable housing opportunities throughout the county
- Serving on the commission's board of directors and supporting fund-raising activities

On May 25, 2004, Anaheim's city council unanimously approved that municipality's new Affordable Family Housing Ordinance. The ordi-

nance, which was developed by the Kennedy Commission and which the council approved unanimously, offers incentives to developers who agree to set aside from 10 percent to 20 percent of their new units for renters living at or below 50 percent of the area's median income.\*

Acting as advocates for affordable-housing developments like Casa Alegre, SJHS employees joined other Kennedy Commission members in attending city council and housing commission meetings, testifying at public hearings, writing letters, and meeting with city council members. Their involvement helped sway public opinion and facilitate the success of these efforts.

The Kennedy Commission has become an established presence in Orange County. The commission can be counted on as a voice for those who can't always participate in daytime meetings or seemingly endless public hearings. Its voice is the biblical call to enact justice and act justly. SJHS supports the commission as a long-term force acting as an advocate for vulnerable and voiceless people.

#### LESSONS LEARNED

We at SJHS have learned valuable lessons from our housing endeavors, including:

- Achieving success in building housing for lower-income people takes time, patience, and persistence.
- Models such as Anaheim's Affordable Housing Ordinance can be developed to generate solutions.
- SJHS employees understand the issue of affordable housing—many face similar hurdles or know people who do—and will mobilize around it if called to do so.
- People (of whatever income level) can be a project's best asset if they are shown what the housing will look like and who will benefit from it. ■

\*See the Kennedy Commission, *Who We Are*, [www.kennedycommission.org/who/who.html](http://www.kennedycommission.org/who/who.html); and the Southern California Association of Non-Profit Housing, *Member News*, [www.scanph.org/member\\_news/](http://www.scanph.org/member_news/).

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