

## Learning Center with a Twist

# New Alamo Area MHA Center to Serve Larger Community

BY CATHERINE A. SMITH



Babcock North Fourplexes II PHOTOS BY SHELLEY NAYLOR

The Alamo Area Mutual Housing Association (AAMHA), a NeighborWorks® organization in San Antonio, of course included a signature learning center in its newly completed 72-unit Babcock North Fourplexes II.

But this is an AAMHA learning center with a difference: It will be the first to offer its programs to the larger community.

Learning centers are at the heart of each of AAMHA's five housing complexes and embody what AAMHA sees as its principal focus: creating a community environment that promotes resident education, self-sufficiency, leadership, and volunteerism.

Babcock North II's center is a 5,000 square foot leasing and learning center that features a porch with rocking chairs, a kitchen, a great room that houses a big-screen TV, and rooms where residents can have potlucks and meetings. Next to this community space is the learning

center, which Jennifer Gonzalez, AAMHA director of resident services, describes as "a huge activity room." Two full-time resident coordinators and an information-technology specialist operate out of an office just outside a well-stocked computer lab. The computers feature high-speed Internet access and are used by both children and adults.

There is an adjacent Babcock North Fourplexes I, which AAMHA acquired in 1990. It has its own learning center for its 136 units.

### Structured Programs

Learning centers "are not places to hang out," Gonzalez said. "Their programs are very structured and are offered consistently throughout

our five sites." Programs are year-round and fall under four main categories – the Pathways Youth Program, Leadership Development and Education, Community Wellness, and Economic Literacy. They feature enrichment activities for children of all ages and adult residents.

The Pathways Youth Program provides after-school, interactive, educational-enrichment activities that emphasize art, music and literacy in an environment of cooperative learning. Children have an opportunity to complete homework and play educational computer games that reinforce math, science, reading and creative thinking. To supplement its youth program, AAMHA collaborates with other organizations such as the Girl Scouts, Junior Achievement, Music Camp and 4H Clubs. Toddler Time is offered two days a week to parents with children under five. Summer hours are extended, with additional programs and field trips.

The Community Leaders Training program, now in



its fourth year, grew from AAMHA's commitment to have residents be active participants within their communities and the MHA. With technical assistance and funding through Neighborhood Reinvestment's Multifamily Initiative, residents attend three-day training sessions over six months that focuses on organizational development, finances, asset management, and conflict resolution. Residents who complete the program may serve on AAMHA's board, make decisions about property issues, and initiate community improvement projects.

Community Wellness activities are designed to bring neighbors into constructive relationships with one another. Activities can be as simple as bingo, as informal as potlucks, or more structured, with arts and crafts or community gardening. "We're trying to support the notion that neighbors can and should rely on one another to reach common goals," Gonzalez said.

Economic Literacy is taught in partnership with other organizations and includes credit counseling, money management, and first-time homebuyer education.

### A Cost of Operating

The cost of operating a learning center with a full menu of services is approximately \$38 a unit a month. AAMHA includes the cost in its operations, which determines the ultimate cost of housing to AAMHA residents.

The Babcock North developments "are in a highly desirable part of the city," according Gonzalez, "providing affordable

housing where it's not readily available." Babcock North II's two- and three-bedroom, two-bath floor plans are attractive to families. Apartments were constructed to be fully accessible. And the large amount of green space around the low-density complex "really does promote a community environment," she said.

"We are really proud that we consistently offer learning centers at each of our complexes," Gonzalez said. This means that residents of all 778 units at AAMHA's five complexes have access to programming that is consistent, "so that if you move to another Alamo property, you can count on the same services at the Learning Center," Gonzalez said.

"We are proud that we have this reputation," she said, "of operating a quality program everywhere." ■



Guests at the grand opening included (left to right) Andrew Cameron, director of housing and community development, city of San Antonio; Stephen Sprecher, Enterprise Mortgage Investments; Arora Ortega-Geis, Fannie Mae; Julie Kenfield, Ricondo and Associates and AAMHA board president; Phil Nelson, Compass Bank; Councilman Art Hall, District 8 and AAMHA board treasurer; Steven Lobo, Christus Health; Naomi Elliot, The Enterprise Foundation; Diana Helms-Moral, Enterprise Social Investment Corporation.

Catherine A. Smith ([cbc.smith@comcast.net](mailto:cbc.smith@comcast.net)) is president of Community-Based Communications, L.L.C., in Cheverly, Maryland.

