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**Feature**

**Buying and Breathing Green**

Sister Mary Alexander Klawinski slept in a chair each night to better take in the oxygen she relied on for more than three years. Unassisted, her breathing was labored. It was just a fact of life.

And then one day, it wasn't. Two months after moving into a renovated residence, Sister Klawinski was off oxygen, and has remained off of it for five years.

"It was a blessing, really it was," she said of the physiological change that she attributes to physical changes in her environment.

What helped Sister Klawinski eliminate her oxygen dependency wasn't so much a simple fix as it was a fix to become simple: her convent home went green.



**Healthy Green**

Sister Klawinski's Felician Sisters of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart gutted the Pennsylvania building that houses both residences and a 300-student high school to make it more environmentally sound and energy efficient. More than seven acres of lawn were converted to meadowland to save on energy and maintenance costs. Solar heat, rainwater, and high-efficiency windows and insulation all contribute to decreased energy consumption. Fresh air circulates, and the sisters clean only with vinegar and other natural products. Paints and flooring were chosen to be low-odor and low-emission, of considerable benefit to Sister Klawinski and others with pulmonary issues.

"I know we have a few sisters who are on those little machines that you press and you breathe in [to receive medication]," she said. "Some of them still use it, but very infrequently."

**Official Green**

Healthcare and senior living communities have been discussing green building more and more. Green affordable housing, however, is rarer, partially given the complexity of financing these projects in the first place.

"Affordable housing is difficult enough to do," said Laura Nettleton, principal of architecture firm Thoughtful Balance. She focuses

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on green single family and affordable multifamily development and worked on the sisters' project while with Perkins Eastman. "There's a tremendous incentive for affordable housing developers to do a LEED certified building. There's money that they can pick up in supplementary financing if they are LEED certified."

The Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) certification is a third-party evaluation that includes several certification categories, including commercial interiors, neighborhood development, new construction and existing buildings. The latter can be used by properties that have no construction plans, but still want to implement energy-saving and other environmental changes.

LEED for homes is a pilot certification program that focuses on multifamily housing. Nettleton and others are working with the U.S. Green Building Council, which administers the programs, to make recommendations to the certification criteria so more affordable and other multifamily properties will be encouraged to pursue them.

Developer a.m. Rodriguez has done several green affordable housing projects in Pennsylvania. It is in the process of a LEED renovation at 79-unit Allegheny Hills Retirement Residence, formerly known as East Brady Heights.

Energy savings at Allegheny Hills are anticipated to be between 20 and 60 percent, depending on the energy model used, contractor Ernie Sota of Sota Construction Services said. The savings are based on comparisons between the energy Allegheny Hills was using prior to renovation, and another affordable housing property that a.m. Rodriguez recently finished renovating. Where East Brady Heights used 34,759 btus of energy per square foot annually, renovated Ross Hill, a facility 30 percent larger, used only 13,530 btus per square foot in the same year.

## Green in the Black

The cost and availability of environmentally sound construction material has changed drastically as green has gone mainstream, Nettleton said. "This is the future. I mean, it's amazing, the change."

When the Felician Sisters renovated their convent into a LEED gold level property, she said, there

were only a couple of companies that could do green carpeting, and that step alone took several months. Now, choices have ballooned, and the costs have come down. The American Institute of Architects recently noted that the premium associated with green construction has all but disappeared.

The cost premium to LEED certify a building is generally 1 to 2 percent and can often be attributed more to the certification costs, which vary based on the project, than to materials, said architect Drew Vennemeyer of Columbus, Ohio-based Design-Group's health care practice group.

Those costs, however, are recouped — and quickly — with an energy efficient building, he added. Properties can always choose to go green without formal certification, though LEED has the benefit of committing all parties to the due diligence required at each step, and buildings often receive positive press for the certification. Buildings that go through the certification process can receive perks depending on where the building is located. Some states will match grants or cover the cost of alternative energy. Some cities, such as Chicago and Pittsburgh, incentivize green building by fast-tracking permit and review processes. And affordable housing properties that apply for competitive low-income housing tax credits may gain extra points on their application for having a green project.

Energy efficiency and environmental responsibility becomes increasingly important as operating and construction costs go up with the prices of gas and other commodities.

"We're facing larger challenges," Nettleton said, "and have to be more clever with the way we use our materials and our resources."

## Additional Resources:

- U.S. Green Building Council [www.usgbc.org](http://www.usgbc.org)
- American Institute of Architects "Local Leaders in Sustainability – Green Incentives" white paper: [www.aia.org/localleaders\\_incentives](http://www.aia.org/localleaders_incentives)