First Place—Phoenix ushers in a new era of housing for special needs populations

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First Place AZ, a Phoenix nonprofit combining apartments, a residential training program and a global leadership institute, is ushering in a new era of housing options for special populations.

The 80,000-square-foot, $9,4 million First Place—Phoenix, designed for adults with autism and other different abilities, recently held its official opening ceremony with local dignitaries, business leaders and families attending.

Residents began moving in to the four-story property in July, drawn to First Place for its focus on innovation and community building, according to a press release.

"After more than two decades of researching and dreaming, it is awe-inspiring to see First Place—Phoenix bustling with the activities of our first 30 residents and 24 employees." said Denise D. Rentz, First Place AZ founder, president and CEO, in a prepared statement.

First Place—Phoenix is the first place outside of their family homes that many of the current residents have lived, the press release stated.

Residents range in age from early-20s to mid-40s. Since July, residents have been experiencing many "firsts," the press release stated, including first friendships, first time cooking on their own, first dates and first jobs. Some parents have taken their first solo vacations, too.

First Place—Phoenix features three main components:

• First Place Apartments: 34 studio, one-, two- and four-bedroom units for adults that include a suite of independent living supports, a wide range of property amenities and a robust community life;

• First Place Transition Academy: A two-year, tuition-based residential training program for participants that is focused on independent living and developing interpersonal skills/career readiness;

• First Place Global Leadership Institute: An international training center for professionals, direct service support providers and medical personnel, and a robust site for research and public-policy advancements.

First Place—Phoenix is the result of more than 20 years of community cultivation, research, focus groups with 100 families, a national family roundtable and national design charrettes, the press release stated. First Place AZ has more than 100 local and national collaborators.

First Place—Phoenix is available and expandable. Leaders from 35 markets across North America and as far away as India, Australia and England have expressed interest in First Place.

"We are today where senior housing was 50 years ago. We have a burgeoning population of adults with autism and other special abilities in need of human and services that most transcend outdated and limited models," Ms. Rentz said in a prepared statement.

"A new generation of dynamic housing is only possible by collectively tapping private, public, philanthropic and nonprofit interests. That's what we're delivering through First Place."

First Place—Phoenix was inspired by 10 design goals featured in the 2009 Opening Doors Plan report conducted by the Urban Land Institute Arizona, Arizona State University and the Southwest Autism Research & Resource Center.

"Phoenix has been dubbed 'the most autism-friendly city in the world' by PBI NewsHour," said First Place AZ Board Chair, Sam Dalil, in a prepared statement. "With that overwhelming community support, we are once again leading the way with a new"
The state-of-the-art building at Third Street and Catalina Avenue includes special security features, a 24/7 staff, sound barriers blocking out street sounds, non-toxic/low-VOC materials and special lighting to mitigate the sensory issues some people with autism experience.

Apartments also include convenient “grab and go” stations where residents can change their shoes and store keys and other important items in an easy-to-remember location.

Hudson/Downey Construction of Phoenix was the general contractor and RHP Architects of Tempe was the architect. Financing is being provided by Clearinghouse CDI, Dudley Ventures, DV Community Investment, First Place Financing Facility and FD Bank. Major donors sponsoring the work of the Global Leadership Institute include the Maricopa Industrial Development Authority and the Colonel Harold Sanders Foundation.

For more information or to get involved, email info@firstplaceaz.org or visit firstplaceaz.org.