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First Place–Phoenix Hosts Opening Ceremony, Ushers in a New Era of Housing for Special Populations

PHOENIX (Sept. 21, 2018) — 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 81,000-square-foot, \$15.4 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 into the four-story property in July, drawn to First Place for its focus on innovation and community building.

“After more than two decades of researching and dreaming, it is awe-inspiring to see First Place–Phoenix buzzing with the activities of our first 32 residents and 24 employees,” says Denise D. Resnik, First Place AZ founder, president and CEO. “I’m humbled by the support of countless elected officials, community and business leaders and family members who have walked with us on this journey of hopes and dreams toward greater independence for our loved ones.”

First Place–Phoenix is the first place outside of their family homes that many of the current residents have lived. Residents range in age from early-20s to mid-40s. Since July, residents have been experiencing many “firsts:” 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:** 55 studio, one-, two- and four-bedroom units for lease 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

Backed by 20+ Years of Research

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. First Place AZ has more than 100 local and national collaborators.

First Place–Phoenix is scalable 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 homes and services that must transcend outdated and limited models,” says Resnik. “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 AZ Board Chair Sara Dial adds, “Phoenix has been dubbed ‘[the most autism-friendly city in the world](#)’ by PBS NewsHour. With that overwhelming community support, we are once again leading the way with a new residential model for people with autism.”

Designed to Accommodate a Variety of Abilities & Preferences

First Place–Phoenix was inspired by [10 design goals](#) featured in the [2009 Opening Doors Report](#) conducted by the Urban Land Institute Arizona, Arizona State University and the [Southwest Autism Research & Resource Center](#).

The state-of-the-art building at Third St. and Catalina Ave. includes special security features, a 24/7 staff, sound barriers blocking out street sounds, nontoxic/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 charge their phones and store keys and other important items in an easy-to-remember location.

Hardison/downey construction of Phoenix was the general contractor and RSP Architects of Tempe was the architect. Financing is being provided by Clearinghouse CDFI, Dudley Ventures, DV Community Investment, First Place Financing Facility and US Bank.

Thanks to our invaluable donors, special spaces include:

- Kemper & Ethel Marley Foundation Landmark
- Virginia G. Piper Charitable Trust Health Spot
- Stardust Foundation Gardens
- Blue Cross Blue Shield of Arizona Transition Academy “Blue Sky” Suite
- Phoenix Industrial Development Authority Transition Academy “Rainbow” Suite
- Sonia’s Culinary Teaching Kitchen, featuring the “First to the Table” program
- Cox Communications Community Room and Entrepreneurial Spot
- Thunderbirds Charities Sports Pool and Joey’s Barbecue Grill
- Arizona Cardinals Game Room
- Sprouts Healthy Communities Foundation Organic Garden
- GoodLife Fitness Room
- Artful Giving Lego Lounge

Major donors sponsoring the work of the Global Leadership Institute include the Maricopa Industrial Development Authority and the Colonel Harland Sanders Foundation.

A Flourishing Community Life

Guided by the CORE (Council of Resident Engagement) of First Place–Phoenix, residents have a strong voice in all community life activities at the property and in the greater community. A calendar of daily, weekly and monthly activities and events is created based on resident input and interests.

“I was part of the groundbreaking [in December 2016] and it’s cool seeing this place from the ground up,” says Lindsey Eaton, a First Place resident and CORE member. “It means independence. It means the ability to do what I want, when I want, where I want and how I want.”

Support from Elected Officials and Business Leaders

“After hearing Denise’s vision for the future for about a decade, I let her know six years ago that we were going to stop talking and start doing something—and we did. We need a wide range of choices like those offered by First Place–Phoenix, depending on needs and abilities. There’s no one-size-fits-all solution. And there is no underestimating the importance and value of working collaboratively with leaders from the public, private, nonprofit and charitable sectors to get things done.” – *Michael Trailor, Director of the Arizona Department of Economic Security and former Director of the Arizona Department of Housing*

“As a leader in the community, First Place is offering residents an opportunity to be as self-sufficient as possible while educating and training those who support them to derive the best possible outcomes.” – *Steve Chucri, Chairman of the Maricopa County Board of Supervisors*

“First Place–Phoenix has stepped up to respond to a need in the community by providing supportive housing where individuals with special needs and abilities can be independent and feel empowered. I want Phoenix to be the most disability-friendly city in the country. Not only is First Place–Phoenix’s approach innovative, but it also brings hope.” – *Thelda Williams, Mayor of Phoenix*

“First Place is using the power of capitalism to address a problem that would otherwise fall exclusively to the government to resolve. This building is proof that capitalism can be a force for good and that for-profit companies can also realize societal benefits.”
– *Adam Goodman, president and CEO of Goodmans Interior Structures, of Phoenix, which donated furniture for the Global Leadership Institute offices*

Blue Cross Blue Shield of Arizona, Cox Communications and Sprouts Healthy Communities Foundation sponsored recent grand-opening events.

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

About First Place® AZ

First Place AZ is a nonprofit organization advancing innovative residential options for adults with autism and other special abilities. First Place is creating replicable residential and post-secondary education models that promote collaboration among the public, private, philanthropic and nonprofit sectors, serving as a catalyst for advancing public policy focused on housing solutions for special populations. First Place celebrates neuro-diversity, independent living and the belief that housing options for people with autism and other special abilities should be as bountiful as they are for everyone else. First Place–Phoenix, the nonprofit’s first new property, opened this summer. Leasing is underway. View the 2016 PBS NewsHour segments at [“Giving Adults with Autism the Skills to Build Independent Lives”](#) and [“How Phoenix Became the Most Autism-Friendly City in the World.”](#) Learn more at firstplaceaz.org.