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First Place: Living center planned for adults with autism

 Catherine Reagor, The Republic | azcentral.com 4:05 p.m. MST April 28, 2015



(Photo: Courtesy of RSP Architects)

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Construction on one of the nation's first residential projects for the growing number of adults with autism is scheduled to start in central Phoenix early next year.

First Place will be a mixed-use development at Third Street and Catalina Drive. It will have 50 apartments, a teaching and career-development academy and a leadership institute for service providers and doctors when its completed in 2017.

Phoenix-based First Place is a nonprofit working to create innovative housing for adults with autism and related disorders. The group was started by Valley business leader Denise Resnik, who also co-founded the Southwest Autism Research & Resource Center in 1997 after her son Matthew was diagnosed with autism.

"Matt is part of a generation of more than 500,000 U.S. children with autism entering adulthood this decade," Denise Resnik said. "As the school bus

stops coming, parents and communities are facing with autism's perfect storm: an increasing population of special needs adults, many of whom cannot live independently; dwindling government resources; and few housing options."

STORY HIGHLIGHTS

- **Complex will have 50 apartments, a teaching and career-development academy, leadership institute.**
- **First Place was started by Valley business leader Denise Resnik, whose son was diagnosed with autism.**
- **Research shows adults with autism become disconnected in their 20s.**

To help prepare autistic adults to live on their own for the first time, the two nonprofits are working together on the First Place Transition Academy, which will offer courses on functional life skills, paid work internships and independent-living courses.

PREVIOUS: [New Phoenix housing complex will cater to autistic adults](#)

Earlier this month, some of First Place's first potential residents moved into

[Phoenix's 29 Palms Apartments, a Foundation for Senior Living project](#)

near 48th Street and McDowell Road.

Most of the complex is for seniors, except six two-bedroom apartments built and set aside for adults with autism. The project is considered a beta test for the First Place housing development.

"Resident students (of First Place) are moving in and experiencing independent living for the first time," said Jeff Ross, First Place executive director.

He said new residents complete a seven-week orientation and then continue to learn skills from their new apartments. The lessons for community life include grocery shopping, navigating transportation, applying for a job and expanding their social networks.

Research from the A.J. Drexel Autism Institute found more than one-third of young adults with autism were disconnected during their early 20s, meaning they never got a job or continued education after high school.

Annual tuition for First Place, covering rent, classes, individualized services and activities is \$42,000 a year.

Extensive planning went into First Place so it can be replicated for other developments for autistic adults in the U.S. and worldwide.