

\$6.3 million project



HUD funds renovation and rent subsidies at Providence Vincent House

This page: Providence Vincent House is located near Pike Place Market in Seattle.

Page 5: Dan Smerken, housing developer for Providence Health System, was presented with a Mother Joseph statue in thanks for his leadership on the Vincent House renovation project. He is shown here with Sr. Lynn Chappell, former provincial treasurer.

One of last year's final events was a reception in thanksgiving for the allocation of \$6.3 million from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) to preserve and rehabilitate Providence Vincent House in Seattle. The four-story, 61-unit building near Pike Place Market offers low-income housing and supportive services to the homeless, disabled and frail elderly. The HUD funds will ensure the continuation of subsidized, supportive housing for this population for the next 40 years.

The Sisters of Providence

have sponsored the low-income housing at Vincent House for the past 20 years and originally developed it in partnership with the City of Seattle, with an agreement to operate it through 2013. The facility incorporates access features for the disabled, with six units that are specifically adapted for residents using wheelchairs. The site offers convenient access to public transportation, shopping and medical centers in a building that also houses commercial space and market-rate condominiums owned by other parties.

"One of the initial works of Blessed Emilie Gamelin, foundress of the Sisters of Providence, was the care of the elderly and the infirm," noted Sister Barbara Schamber, then-team leader/provincial. "That legacy continues today with compassionate care and personal attention to the needs of the poor. Vincent House is a part of that legacy."

The sisters and others from the Providence community thanked all those who collaborated on the funding requests, including Dan Smerken, housing developer for Providence Health System, who was accompanied by his wife, Marissa Arbucci. "Dan, we would not be here today if it were not

Health System included Chuck Hawley, vice president of government affairs; Robert T. Hellrigel, chief executive of senior and community services; and Diane Groeschel, director of low-income housing. Also present were Ellen Garcia, executive director of Providence ElderPlace, Seattle; and Sister Mary Grondin, director of Vincent House, as well as staff members and residents.

The Vincent House project

had its beginning several years before it opened its doors to residents. In late 1980, Jack Greeley, then director of public affairs for the Sisters of Providence, began researching the possibility of obtaining federal funds to help the sisters in a new ministry providing housing for the poor and the elderly. The following February he presented his findings to the General Council in Montreal and the project received the council's enthusiastic endorsement and support.

In 1981 Washington State was authorized only 12 housing units of this type in the City of Seattle and only 60 for all of King County. There was a housing shortage in Seattle for the elderly poor and disabled, and the city encouraged the sisters to become involved in the project, offering its support. Pike Place Market was being rebuilt in an urban renewal

project and the city was accepting proposals for a \$19 million building program that would include 64 units for the low-income elderly. The units would be sold at below cost to a non-profit group, and the Provincial Council authorized Jack Greeley to seek to purchase and manage the units.

At that time, according to the sisters' chronicles, "no prediction could be made with regard to the future financial position of the Sisters of Providence." However, risking beyond their

securities, the sisters stepped out on faith. Sister Lucille Dean, superior at the time, signed the letter of intent to be involved in this venture and entered into negotiations with the city. According to the chronicles: "This letter indicated that the sisters were willing to commit \$1,545,000 for the project on a long-term basis – a 30-year forgivable debt basis. A key element of the condition of the 'forgiving' of the loan is that the Sisters of Providence continue to use this project for the service of the poor." The City of Seattle agreed to contribute \$900,000.

The sisters were delighted when their proposal was accepted. Sister Anita Butler, then provincial treasurer, took on the role of leading the program. Construction began at the end of 1982 and the units were the subject of a Dedication Mass and Blessing in January 1985. Sister Mary Grondin accepted the role of manager of the units. All members of the General Council from Montreal were present for the occasion. A public dedication was held the following month, with Seattle Mayor Charles Royer in attendance. The apartments were opened for occupancy on March 4, 1985.

Throughout its history, Vincent House has been fully subsidized by the religious community. No more than 30 percent of a tenant's annual income is charged for rent, and all utilities except telephone are included.

Today, 20 years after its inception,

Vincent House is in need of significant renovation, and has seen a significant increase in operating costs. The Leadership Team set a goal of ensuring the future of Vincent House as a provider of affordable housing for the elderly as well as supportive services onsite.

"We sought Dan Smerken's advice about viable alternatives, and it was his recommendation that we apply to the Department of Housing and Urban Development to accept Vincent House as a HUD project," Sister Barbara said. In 2003, Dan put in many hours preparing the HUD application, but it was not accepted due to a technicality. Undaunted, the Leadership Team asked Dan to reapply in 2004.

Dan made sure no stone was left unturned, including seeking letters of support from Washington state's delegation in the U.S. Congress. U.S. Senators Patty Murray and Maria Cantwell, along with U.S. Representative Jim McDermott, were happy to help, as was Sister Joyce Cox, BVM, delegate for religious for the Archdiocese of Seattle. In fact, letters of support were garnered from far and wide, including a host of local and state agencies and organizations that provide services and support to the low-income elderly. All expressed the vital nature of the ministry of Vincent House, as well as trust and confidence in the excellent service that Providence provides in serving unmet needs.

By the time the application for funds under Section 202, the Supportive Housing for the Elderly program, was completed, the packet was nearly 3 inches thick. Last June, Dan sent the packet to Washington, D.C. The Sisters of Providence, the Providence Associates and many others sent along their prayers for success. Word came in October that Vincent House had been accepted as a HUD project. Pre-development work began immediately and construction is hoped to begin in 2005. ●



for your dedication to this project," Sister Barbara said in presenting him with a statue of Mother Joseph for his dedication and hard work in preparing the application and shepherding it through the HUD process.

Special guests included Bill Reid, project manager for Walsh Construction; the project architect, Michael Fancher, of Michael Fancher and Associates; and Cindy Erickson, asset manager for the Seattle Office of Housing. Guests from Providence