

Report hails St. Paul public housing success

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Margaret Riff, 74, was a practical nurse in a psychiatric ward before she retired. Now, she says she's living with people like the ones she once cared for.

"I never realized I'd retire to a psych house, but that's what this is," Riff said of her public housing high-rise at 10 W. Exchange St. in St. Paul.

Although Riff and some other elderly people in St. Paul public housing complain about living with younger residents with a variety of problems, a federal study to be released later this year says St. Paul is a leader in dealing with this issue.

A preliminary report hails St. Paul's efforts, which include screening applicants, enforcing leases and offering services to help different types of residents live together.

One program, dubbed STAR for

Services to Assisted Residents, uses city funding to provide individual counseling and group activities for tenants. At Riff's high-rise, group activities have included mental health seminars, a patio party and a social where young and older residents danced together.

"We don't want to say we've got it all licked," said Jon Gutzman, executive director of the Public Housing Agency of St. Paul. "It's a continuing concern for us."

In the last decade, public housing has attracted an increasing number of younger people with problems such as mental illness, physical disability or chemical dependency. Thirty percent of St. Paul's public housing residents are under 62; the remaining 70 percent are elderly.

Other cities, such as Minneapolis, face more intense problems between young and old residents. In Minneapolis, 46 percent of the public housing residents are elderly.

"A good tenant doesn't depend on age," said Judy Dahlberg, a housing manager who oversees 14 buildings. "A good tenant depends on behavior."

Dahlberg said she and other staff members sometimes have to remind residents that public housing serves elderly people as well as those with physical and mental disabilities.

But some elderly residents, such as Lillian Lynch, 70, have no qualms about living with young people.

"I like having younger people around," said Lynch, who has lived at 10 W. Exchange for eight years. "I don't see my children very often and it makes me feel younger."

Lynch said the young residents have visited her in her apartment and run errands for her. She added that she defends them when other elderly residents say they should not be allowed to live there.

Phoebe McNeill, 45, said she had to overcome some prejudices

against younger residents when she moved into the building. Today she is president of the residents' council.

"Unless they can see the disability, they don't understand," said McNeill, who lives in public housing because her husband suffers from depression and epilepsy.

The other side of the problem, McNeill said, is that some mentally ill younger residents don't realize that behavior such as blocking an elevator doorway or using profane language is disrespectful.

Gutzman said another solution may be forthcoming. Two bills before Congress would allow public housing exclusively for elderly residents. Public housing for a mix of older and younger residents would continue, but the option of elderly-only public apartment buildings would be available.

"It's really only in the public, low-cost housing field that the elderly cannot live only with other elderly," Gutzman said.