

New apartments open doors to those on limited budgets

By Mike Snyder, Staff

Margarita Reyes, a Houston Police Department microfilm operator, wanted to leave her "very crowded" apartment building, but a tight budget limited her choices. Brent Thompson, a pharmaceutical salesman, was simply looking for a good deal on a two-bedroom apartment.

Both found what they were looking for at the Washington Courtyards, a new affordable housing development where city officials and leaders of nonprofit agencies gathered Thursday for a grand-opening ceremony.

Reyes is living in one of 44 apartments set aside for low-income people, with rents adjusted accordingly. Thompson is in one of the 30 "market rate" units, where no income guidelines apply and rents are higher, although they compare favorably with nearby apartments of comparable quality.

Thursday's grand opening was the second Houston event in the past week to celebrate new, mixed-income housing developments. On Saturday, officials announced the opening of Tidwell Estates, a 132-unit apartment complex in Acres Homes in northeast Houston.

Increasingly, policy-makers and community activists are embracing the view that housing developments where people of different income levels live side by side - in a neighborhood or in an apartment building - can yield a number of social and economic benefits.

In Texas and many other states, for example, developers who build mixed-income projects have a better chance of receiving low-income housing tax credits, which are awarded on a competitive basis. The developers who receive these credits sell them to private investors and use the proceeds to help finance their projects.

Both Washington Courtyards and Tidwell Estates were financed in part with tax credits.

In the contentious arena of housing policy, few principles are as widely accepted as the desirability of moving the poor out of ghettos and into diverse communities.

"All kinds of bad things happen when you concentrate people in poverty," said Harold Simon, executive director of the National Housing Institute, a nonprofit housing research organization.

This is the central idea driving the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's Hope VI program, which redevelops traditional public housing projects by dispersing their residents throughout a community.

The demolition of Houston's Allen Parkway Village and reconstruction of its housing units in various locations was funded by a Hope VI grant.

When welfare-dependent public housing residents move from sprawling projects into mixed-income neighborhoods, federal officials say, they benefit from the example of neighbors who are employed and who seek educational opportunities for their children.

Research by social scientists supports this idea.

A 1994 study by James E. Rosenbaum, a sociology professor at Northwestern University, examined the impact of a Chicago program that provided rent vouchers enabling low-income black families to move into middle-class suburban neighborhoods.

After the move, many of the program's adult participants got jobs for the first time in their lives, the study found, and their children were more likely to stay in school and to go to college.

In a development such as Washington Courtyards, the income disparities tend to be less extreme than those in the Chicago program. Even so, both the market-rate and below-market tenants can benefit from living near people from different backgrounds, said Jot Couch Jr., executive director of the Texas Inter-Faith Housing Corp., a partner in the development.

"The idea has begun to expand that the combination of (incomes) makes it better for everyone," Couch said.

Mary Lawler, executive director of the Avenue Community Development Corp., the other partner in the development, said the mixed-income characteristic of Washington Courtyards is consistent with the organization's goal of preserving the diversity of the neighborhoods it serves north and west of downtown.

"A lot of the lower-income people are being pushed out of the community," Lawler said, as a growing market for housing near downtown prompts a flurry of development aimed at an affluent market.

Lawler said prospective tenants for the market-rate apartments have not seemed particularly concerned about the prospect of having neighbors in identical apartments with subsidized rents.

Thompson, the pharmaceutical salesman, said he knew little about low-income housing issues but was attracted by the high quality and favorable rents at Washington Courtyards.

"I decided to go ahead and go into it with an open mind and see how things go," Thompson said. Reyes, for her part, said she foresees no problems.

"I'm not hard to get along with," she said.