

# Developers and Affordable Housing Series



## Partnerships with Non-Profits Help Create New Kinds of Affordable and Supportive Housing

Can housing for people with disabilities offer access to the daily care they need to stay independent, and still be affordable? A growing number of developers across Canada say it can. Now, they're investing their time, expertise and resources to prove it.

People with disabilities face unique challenges when it comes to housing. In addition to having to find a home that is both accessible and affordable, they also often require a network of support services in order to maintain their independence, privacy and dignity.

Thankfully, developers like Southwest Ontario's Nasr Nasr have begun finding new ways to help their tenants meet that challenge head-on. By partnering with a local non-profit service provider, he has been able to build accessible and affordable homes that not only meet his tenants' needs, but which offer them direct access to a true community of support – and give them a real chance at a better life.



**Figure 1** Blue Haven Apartments in Amherstburg, Ontario

"Growing up, my family was always involved in trying to find ways to give back to the community," Nasr explains. "When I was twenty-four, I read an article about the urgent need for more affordable housing right here in Canada, and I

realized you could do both – build a successful business as a property developer, and still do good for other people who were in need of a helping hand."

"I ended up falling in love with affordable housing. Now, my passion for it has become a big part of both my business and my life."

### The Blue Haven Apartments

The **Blue Haven Apartments** in Amherstburg, Ontario are a perfect example of exactly what can happen when this kind of passion and commitment is put into action.

Developed by Nasr's company, **Nasr Limited**, Blue Haven features 24 one-bedroom townhomes, spread out over two buildings along a tranquil riverfront. The units are all classified as affordable rentals. A majority of them are also barrier-free and fully accessible, which means they provide safe and comfortable housing for people with a wide range of needs, incomes and physical abilities.

When Nasr first had the idea of building an affordable housing project in the Amherstburg area, he looked at close to a dozen potential properties. One of the last buildings he visited – the former Blue Haven Motel – had definitely seen better days. But as soon as Nasr laid eyes on the neglected property in early 2017, he knew it was exactly what he had been looking for.

"Whether I'm looking for a vacant lot I can build on or a building we can convert, I'm always looking for the same three things," Nasr says.

“First, it has to be centrally located close to transit, shopping, parks and other services, so people can get what they need easily, and also so that they can really feel like they’re part of the community.”

“Second, it has to be available at a price that makes sense for affordable housing, which usually means a building that needs a fair bit of work.”

“Third, I have to see opportunities for ways we make it even more affordable through the construction or renovation. That way, I can pass those savings onto my tenants over the lifetime of the building.”

## Accessible, affordable and supportive living

To keep costs at a minimum, Nasr chose finishes, surfaces and features that would last a long time, keep his monthly utility bills to a minimum, and which would require relatively little ongoing maintenance. This included things like:

- **Concrete driveways and parking lots** for both buildings, which last longer than asphalt and require significantly less long-term maintenance.
- **High-efficiency central boiler** that provides both heating and hot water for all the units at a much lower cost than a traditional heating system.
- **Extra-tight building envelope with high levels of insulation** throughout the apartments, to keep utility bills down and create healthier and more comfortable living environments.
- **Energy- and water-efficient appliances, faucets and lighting** to minimize both the ongoing electricity costs and the overall environmental footprint.
- **In-floor heating** to create a healthy and comfortable indoor space, while reducing energy consumption.
- **Open-concept, barrier-free floorplans** to lower construction costs for interior walls and provide greater accessibility for tenants with physical disabilities and their visitors.

“It’s amazing the places where you can save a lot of money in the long run for just an extra five or ten per cent investment up-front,” Nasr explains.

“Making choices like these during the construction can help keep my long-term costs down, and allow me to rent my units out for anywhere up to twenty per cent below market rates.”



**Figure 2** Blue Haven Motel under renovation to affordable housing



**Figure 3** Landscaped grounds around Blue Haven Apartments

## Building success through partnerships

Nasr also recommends looking for partners who can help make a project more successful.

In the case of Blue Haven, for example, because all of the units were going to be designated as affordable housing, Nasr was able to obtain substantial funding from the federal, provincial and municipal governments to help subsidize the cost of construction. He also qualified for grants from the local utility companies for installing energy-efficient appliances and lighting.

But perhaps the most important partnership was the one that Nasr formed with **Assisted Living Southwestern Ontario (A.L.S.O.)**. A.L.S.O. is an Ontario-based non-profit group that provides services and support to help adults with physical disabilities live independently in the community.





**Figure 4** Entrance to support services for apartment residence and the community

During the redevelopment, Nasr set aside one of the Blue Haven units as a permanent office and resource space for the group. In return, A.L.S.O. staff now work out of the office 24 hours a day, 365 days a year, to help the tenants who have physical disabilities with everything from personal care and daily living tasks, to social recreation and counselling.

*“Whether someone needs help getting ready in the morning, or just someone to talk to in the middle of the night, A.L.S.O. is always there to help them.”*

- Nasr

“Even better, in the case of Blue Haven, they’re just a phone call or a few steps away. This way, people have access to the kind of daily help they’d normally only get from living in a long-term care or assisted living facility, but without having to give up the freedom of having an apartment of their own,” Nasr says.

In addition, the A.L.S.O. team also uses its office at Blue Haven as a hub to service the surrounding region as a whole. As a result, they are able to provide services and other benefits not just for the tenants of Blue Haven, but for the entire community around it.

“We deliver our services in what we call ‘neighbourhoods of care,’” explains A.L.S.O. Executive Director, Lynn Calder. “From our office at Blue Haven, we provide round-the-clock care to all of the building’s tenants who require it. But we can also dispatch our staff from that location to help dozens of other people throughout the region.”

“This frees up more spaces in the city’s hospitals and long-term care facilities, plus it allows us to help more people than we otherwise would have been able to. The result is a win-win for us, for our clients, and for the entire community.”



**Figure 5** Support service office – A.L.S.O. (Assisted Living Southwestern Ontario)



**Figure 6** Blue Haven Apartments including former garage now a support service office



## Attention to detail

The partnership with A.L.S.O. has worked out so well that Nasr is convinced initiatives like it could be replicated in communities across the province, or maybe even across the country.

Of course, that isn't to say that there haven't been some challenges along the way. According to Nasr, one of the biggest challenges he tends to face in developing affordable housing, is that it can sometimes be difficult to get people living in the community to buy into a project or share the same vision.

Because the idea of exactly what "affordable housing" is isn't always clear, many people instinctively resort to NIMBY-ism ("Not In My Back Yard") as their first, knee-jerk response.

But once the neighbours see these formerly empty, abandoned or derelict properties transformed into beautiful and vibrantly-restored parts of the community, Nasr says that the people who fought the hardest against an affordable housing project often turn into some of its biggest supporters.

"I think we all just need to give things a chance," Nasr says. "These are just people who want a nice place to live, just like anyone else."

"For our part, we try to think of every building we renovate or construct as more than just housing. It's somebody's home. Then, when people see how much we care about doing it right, and how much the tenants care about their homes, they generally come on-board."

## Meeting the needs of developers, tenants and the community

For Nasr, every project comes with its own unique challenges, and its own rewards. But the important thing is to keep finding new ways to make more affordable housing possible.

"As costs go higher, it becomes harder and harder to build housing that's both affordable and of good quality," he says. "But that's what makes it more important than ever to keep trying."

"The need for affordable housing in Canada has never been greater. There are so many good people out there who just want to have a place to live, a home they can afford, and a chance at changing their lives. As a developer, I see it as part of my job to do what I can to give them that chance."

### Find out more

Assisted Living Southwestern Ontario (A.L.S.O.):  
<http://www.alsogroup.org>

Assisted Living Southwestern Ontario YouTube  
Channel: <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UChTkWVKBjutB-yZ8XoWQhCA/featured>

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