



Controversial Group Home in Luxe Harlem Building a Success, Organizers Say

By [Jeff Mays](#) on September 19, 2013 6:22am | Updated on September 19, 2013 6:22am

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Community Options Houses Developmentally Disabled Men

HARLEM — A controversial program that placed four developmentally disabled men into a \$550,000 apartment in a Harlem luxury building has become a teaching moment for advocates who say the initial resistance dissipated once the men arrived.

[The nonprofit group Community Options New York](#) purchased the three-bedroom, 1,400-square-foot condo inside the Savoy West, a luxury building on Lenox Avenue at 138th Street, following [a battle with neighbors and Community Board 10](#).

Residents in the building feared the mini group home would affect their safety and their property values, and CB10 argued that Harlem had more than its fair share of supportive housing.

But the building has quickly come to accept the tenants, according to Savoy West condo board president Glenn Martin, who called the inclusion of the men a "seamless" process.

"Most people don't even know they exist in the building. It's been the opposite of the 'sky is falling' scenario painted by the community board," said Martin, who said he was speaking in his role on the condo board, not on behalf of CB10, of which he is also a member.

Advocates say the apartment can be a model for how people with developmental disabilities can be placed back into their communities as part of the city's and state's larger, decades-long efforts at de-institutionalizing them.

"Once the neighbors got to know the guys, there was no tension. Once people meet them and talk to them, it alleviates any concerns," said Community Options' executive director Christopher Thompson, adding that Community Options has been inviting key community officials to tour the spacious home and holding open houses for the men's neighbors.

"They open doors and say good morning," Alicia Henry, 45, a residential director for the site, said of the men's efforts to get to know their new neighbors.

On Tuesday, Harlem City Councilwoman Inez Dickens met three of the four men who moved in last October. She said she was impressed with the facility, which has stainless steel appliances and high-end finishes, and its residents.



 Slideshow
Savoy West

"They just want to stand on their own, have their own apartment where they can go in the fridge when they want or have a job," she said. "This gives them the support to be men and women just like everyone else."

Roy King, 23, who moved from a large assisted-living facility in Westchester County to be closer to his family on Manhattan's Lower East Side, proudly led Dickens on a tour of the kitchen before he sat down to a lunch of pizza with his roommates.

"We go shopping every Thursday," he said, adding that the new space was much better than his previous home.

"I didn't like it there. I wanted to move on in my life," said King, who was born with a developmental disability.

Two men live in each bedroom, and there's a den for drawing and playing the guitar. The residents range in age from 18 to 23 and have no criminal or drug history, Thompson said. There is at least one residential adviser in the apartment 24 hours per day. These workers help coordinate activities and help with things like shopping, cooking and transportation.

"It demonstrates that we can all co-exist in the same environment," said Henry. "We like to say we are just visiting because this is their home."

Dickens said it's important to differentiate between drug treatment facilities and halfway houses, and the housing Community Options provides.

"Harlem has its share of halfway houses and I want them equally spread around the city," she said. "But I don't think people were sure about what supportive housing means. They think drug program or formerly incarcerated."

Fears about the unit's effect on property values have also been unfounded, Martin said.

"Nothing that has happened has slowed down sales and the building is now fully sold," he said.

Henrietta Lyle, chairwoman of CB10, said the board was never opposed to helping people with disabilities.

"We were looking at the oversaturation of social service programs in the community," she said.

Even with the success of the property at Savoy West, Thompson says finding additional properties in Manhattan to create similar mini group homes has not been easy. He has a waiting list of 13 developmentally disabled people looking to live in Manhattan so they can be closer to their families.

Thompson has visited 86 properties since Community Options closed on the Savoy West unit last year, and made offers on 13 of them. Eleven of those property owners have walked away from the offers because of the difficult and lengthy process of the nonprofit getting approval to buy them.

Community Options is looking at two units in East Harlem now, said Thompson, who said he hopes the process goes more smoothly as people learn about clients like King, who has big plans.

"I want to move out on my own one day," King said.