

JRS uses grant to buy Squirrel Hill building

BY TOBY TABACHNICK

Staff Writer

Jewish Residential Services (JRS), partnering with Action Housing, has been awarded a \$1.1 million grant from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development to purchase and rehabilitate a Squirrel Hill building to be used for housing for people with intellectual disabilities.

The grant was part of HUD's 811 program, designed to provide housing for people with disabilities.

The building, located on Darlington Road between Murray Avenue and Shady Avenue, will be refurbished to provide 10 one-bedroom independent living units, and should be ready for its new tenants in about two years. The building is within walking distance of the shopping district, Jewish Community Center and bus lines.

JRS is a nonprofit organization that provides residential and rehabilitation services to people needing assistance

Please see JRS, page 27.

JRS: Charles Morris Hall the model

Continued from page 1.

because of psychiatric or developmental disabilities. It currently operates a similar housing community for people with intellectual disabilities: Charles Morris Hall on Munhall Road, a 12-unit building that is fully occupied.

JRS established Charles Morris Hall about seven years ago along with Action Housing, another nonprofit specializing in creating affordable housing for people with disabilities or limited income. There are 30 people on a waiting list for an apartment in Charles Morris Hall.

Because of the demand for this type of housing, JRS had been searching for another suitable building in Squirrel Hill, but had been unsuccessful working with a realtor.

"There are not a lot of vacant buildings in Squirrel Hill," said Debbie Friedman, executive director of JRS.

It was not until JRS board member E. J. Strassburger was out walking his dog that he happened to stumble upon the building on Darlington. The only prob-

lem was that it was not for sale.

Even so, he thought that the building would perfectly suit the needs of JRS, so he contacted its owner.

"The owner was a mensch," Strassburger said. "He was a little skeptical when I called him out of the blue, but I convinced him I was calling for a good cause. He thought it over for a couple weeks, and we struck a deal last spring, contingent on HUD approval."

The building is currently fully occupied, but, pursuant to HUD procedures, all tenants will be given ample notice of JRS's purchase, and will even be offered financial assistance, if necessary, to help with the cost of the move.

The \$1.1 million HUD grant will not cover the entire amount necessary to purchase the building and to rehabilitate it to the standards required by HUD, said Friedman. The balance will be provided through fund-raising efforts.

Tenants of the new building will pay rent according to their ability, said Friedman. The rent money will go back

to HUD, which will, in turn, provide the funding necessary to continue to support the building.

Although JRS will not have staff on the premises fulltime, the agency will provide the services and programming necessary to make the apartment community a success. JRS staff will "work with the tenants in developing the skills they need to live independently successfully, and to develop a community within the building," said Friedman.

"We're looking for people who have the ability to live independently, but who may need a little education and training to be able to do that," Friedman continued.

JRS will also organize community activities for the residents, said Friedman, but those activities "will depend on what the tenants are interested in doing. We're thinking it will be very much like Charles Morris Hall; we're targeting the same population."

Some of those community activities include a weekly Shabbat dinner, a movie night in the building's common space,

and informal games. Celebration of Jewish and national holidays, and outings, such as trips to sporting events, may also be arranged, according to Friedman.

JRS will also provide classes for the residents if necessary, including those on cooking and money management.

"Our example is Charles Morris Hall," said Friedman. "People there have become like a family. These people had a hard time finding a peer group before moving into the building. They kind of fell into the cracks. [At Charles Morris Hall] they really found not only a place to live independently, but a whole social group that they didn't have access to previously."

Friedman recalled a conversation she had with one of the residents at Charles Morris Hall, prior to his moving into that facility. When asked what he wanted from the move, he responded, "I want a life just like everyone else."

"That's what people have gotten," said Friedman, "and what we hope people will get from this new building. An opportunity for a life."