

## In Practice

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# Rochester View Apartments Provide Affordable Housing Designed for Residents Who Are Deaf, Hard of Hearing, or Use ASL



Rochester View Apartments has enhanced features for persons who are Deaf or hard of hearing or who use ASL. Credit: SWBR Architects.

Henrietta, New York, is located near the city of Rochester, where the Rochester School for the Deaf and the National Center for Deaf Health Research are situated. The town of Henrietta itself is home to the Rochester Institute of Technology's National Technical Institute for the Deaf (NTID). The town has a high percentage of individuals who are Deaf or hard of hearing — 3.1 percent of the noninstitutionalized population under the age of 65, compared with only 1.4 percent for the United States as a whole — and many of these individuals cannot afford market-rate housing. [Rochester View Apartments](#), a 61-unit affordable housing development completed by [DePaul Properties](#) in fall 2015, was designed by [SWBR Architects](#) with features that meet the specific needs of those who have hearing difficulties and promote a sense of community for residents.

## Meeting Resident Needs and Fostering a Sense of Community

According to Gillian Conde, vice president of DePaul Properties, a regional nonprofit organization that develops and manages affordable housing and provides supportive services, a Deaf individual earns an average of \$20,000 less per year than a hearing person, often making market-rate rents unaffordable. As DePaul began planning an affordable apartment building for residents who are Deaf, the all-Deaf staff at a former DePaul community residence noted that residents had felt less isolated because they were all Deaf and the staff were fluent in American Sign Language (ASL). In response, DePaul decided to design the apartment building so that it would foster community and enhance daily living for its intended residents. DePaul brought in SWBR Architects and held meetings with individuals who are Deaf or hard of hearing as well as ASL users. DePaul also organized an advisory board of Deaf professionals and advocates who provided input on all aspects of the project, including siting and design.

The new development that came out of these considerations was Rochester View Apartments, located in Henrietta because the town is proximate to many regional institutions that serve the Deaf and several businesses in the town offer specialized services; for example, closed captioning is available at the local movie theater, and a local grocery store has a staff member who is fluent in ASL. Although Rochester View Apartments is open to people without hearing difficulties, those who are Deaf or hard of hearing are given preference for the units. Of the development's 61 one- and two-bedroom apartments, 33 are reserved for households whose income is less than or equal to 50 percent of the area median income (AMI), and 28 are set aside for households whose income does not exceed 60 percent of AMI.

Rochester View Apartments is the state's first development in which all of the units have enhanced features for persons who are Deaf or hard of hearing or who use ASL. The apartments include videophone capability and wiring for bed shakers that alert sleeping residents to emergency situations, and units feature flat screen televisions with closed captioning. Extra lighting and cameras are placed around apartment entryways so that residents can see visitors at their doors, and faucets and garbage disposals have safety lights. Hard-wired strobe systems flash different colors to notify residents if the doorbell or videophone is ringing or if an emergency exists such as a fire or high level of carbon monoxide.

Because people communicating through ASL need to see each other, SWBR designed the individual and common spaces with long sight lines. Open floor plans in the units allow residents a clear view from the living room into the kitchen and similarly an open floor plan and windows allow residents to see across the lobby, community room, and the reception area. The developers chose finishes carefully to avoid colors and patterns that might distract people using ASL, according to Conde. In addition, common areas are decorated with artwork provided through a partnership with NTID and local artists. Because people with hearing difficulties may not be able to hear how loudly they, for instance, close a door, the building also features additional insulation to reduce sound transfer.

To allow residents to congregate and get to know one another, Rochester View Apartments offers many shared spaces, including an activity room, terrace, community room, sunroom, and computer room as well as free laundry facilities. The onsite manager is fluent in ASL, and other DePaul staff attend ASL classes to ensure that they can easily communicate with residents. In addition, [case managers](#) are available for residents seeking mental health [services](#).

## Financing

The development cost for Rochester View Apartments was \$17.5 million. First Sterling provided \$6.6 million in equity in exchange for federal low-income housing tax credits awarded by New York State Homes and Community Renewal (HCR). The New York State Housing Trust Fund Corporation also awarded \$4.9 million to the development, and the Community Preservation Corporation provided a \$5.4 million loan. Other financing sources included the New York State Energy Research and Development Authority and HCR's Urban Initiatives program. Operational funding for Rochester View's case management program is provided by the New York State Office of Mental Health.

## Resident and Community Impact

Rochester View Apartments was fully leased within a month of opening, and the development currently has a waiting list for new residents. Approximately 60 percent of residents have hearing difficulties. Residents have appreciated the community's special features and design, and in January 2016, Rochester View Apartments received a Community Impact Award from the New York Housing Conference. According to Conde, residents also appreciate the development's enhanced safety features, especially the hard wiring for alarm systems. Rochester View Apartments has also fostered a sense of community among residents, who often attend cooking classes, card games, and parties, as well as programs run by the Rochester Recreation Club of the Deaf, which are held in the development's community [spaces](#).

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