

Families in need of a home drawn for 'green' apartments

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Joe Meccia felt his chances of finding an apartment he could afford in Morris County, one of the wealthiest counties in the nation, were as good as picking the winning numbers in Lotto.

This week, No. 184 became Meccia's winning number.

It was the number he was given when he entered a lottery for selecting low-income families to move into an affordable apartment complex opening today in Morristown.

"It's fantastic," said Meccia of being selected. "It's in this area where it is needed the most."

Meccia and his two children will be one of the families moving this month into a 12-unit apartment complex that was built by the organization Homeless Solutions on Abbet Avenue.

Homeless Solutions broke ground on the project in May 2007, creating a pair of three-story buildings which together contain four one-bedroom units, four two-bedroom units and four three-bedroom units.

The \$3 million project incorporated environment-friendly construction and features. Workers recycled materials from the demolition of the previous building on the grounds and installed "green" roofing, energy-saving appliances, bamboo flooring and water-conserving toilets, shower heads and faucets.

The project won a Smart Growth Award from New Jersey Future because of those features and the complex's proximity to public transportation.

The families who are moving in were selected out of 213 applications received before the July deadline.

"You can see the impact most clearly on the people who get selected for the apartments," said Katie Laud, chief financial officer at Homeless Solutions. "One woman, she was in tears when we told her she was approved."

Half the households in Morris County have an income of more than \$83,800. For the complex, the organization picked families whose income fell into one of three tiers: 30 percent, 50 percent, or 60 percent of that figure. The families sign a year-long lease to pay a monthly rent based on where they fall among the three income tiers.

Meccia, who makes \$30,000 annually from two retail jobs, will pay \$929 a month for his three-bedroom apartment.

His selection ends a two-year search for a home large enough for him and his children, and highlights the challenge of obtaining affordable housing in the seventh wealthiest county in the United States.

Meccia, a 44-year-old divorced father of a 10-year-old son and 11-year-old daughter, resides in Cedar Grove, where his children share a bedroom.

Meccia said his inquiries about low-income apartments often ended with his name being added to a waiting list already containing hundreds of people.

"It's hell," said Meccia of the search for affordable housing. "There is no other way to describe it."

Now he is searching for furniture to fill his new place, and he plans to surprise his children this weekend with their own bedrooms.

"My biggest joy is to give them something that is going to be theirs," Meccia said.

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