

Street Roots

Once-houseless Native families now have a home in a gentrifying neighborhood

NAYA was successful in renting 51 of 59 new units in Portland to Native households, and a clever financing model made that possible

By **Brian Oaster** | 26 Aug 2020



*Nesika Illahee in Portland is a 59-unit affordable-housing complex for Native Americans in recovery from substance use disorder. Here, a mural called *Katamí Átlawish* (Grandmother's Prayers), by Yakama artist Toma Villa, depicts a Siletz grandmother holding cedar smudge in an abalone shell. (Photo by Brian Oaster)*

Nesika Illahee is the first of its kind. The 59-unit affordable-housing complex doubles as off-reservation tribal housing, which serves urban Natives in recovery from drug and alcohol addiction. The completed building is a finalist for awards from the [Urban Land Institute](#) and [Affordable Housing Finance Magazine](#).

But it was a gamble. Nothing like Nesika Illahee has been done in Oregon, if anywhere. But what makes it unique has also enabled it to succeed where another housing complex built to house Native Americans failed.

In February 2017, the Native American Youth and Family Center (NAYA) opened an affordable-housing complex called NAYA Generations. It was meant to gather Native elders together with families fostering Native children to build a community of mutual support.

Generations didn't meet its goals. When it filled, the 40-unit apartment complex didn't house a single foster family, and only seven households included seniors. NAYA couldn't show preference to Native applicants.

"NAYA did not expect that fair-housing laws would be as constraining and inflexible with regard to implementation as it turns out they are," [NAYA's executive director Paul Lumely told Willamette Week at the time.](#)

So NAYA tried a different approach.

At a meeting of the Affiliated Tribes of Northwest Indians, Lumely was chatting with Sami Jo Difuntorum, executive director of the Siletz Tribal Housing Department, when they overheard someone from Housing and Urban Development mention the idea of using Indian Housing Block Grant funds. These grants usually go toward tribal housing on reservations, but there was no reason a tribe couldn't invest them in urban housing, too. That would allow NAYA to give tribal preference and still be in compliance with fair-housing laws.

This was just the piece NAYA needed for its next project, Nesika Illahee, which was already in the planning stages with Community Development Partners.

"NAYA and CDP already had this project in the hopper, and they were looking for the Indian Housing Block Grant piece of it," Difuntorum said. "And Siletz says, 'Let's give it a try.'" NAYA, CDP and Siletz also partnered with the Native American Rehabilitation Association to focus the apartment community on recovery and wellness by providing onsite services.

"This has never been done here in Portland the way that we've done it," said Oscar Arana, NAYA's director of community development, "so we were very worried."

NAYA reserved 20 of the 59 apartments for Native tenants, with first preference going to Siletz tribal members. The building is now fully occupied. It houses not 20 but 51 Native households.

"We had twice as many interested as we had apartments available," Difuntorum said.

It worked.

Growing corn, culture, community

Nesika Illahee, which means “Our Place” in Chinook, opened in late January, just around the corner from NAYA on Northeast 42nd Avenue and Holman Street.

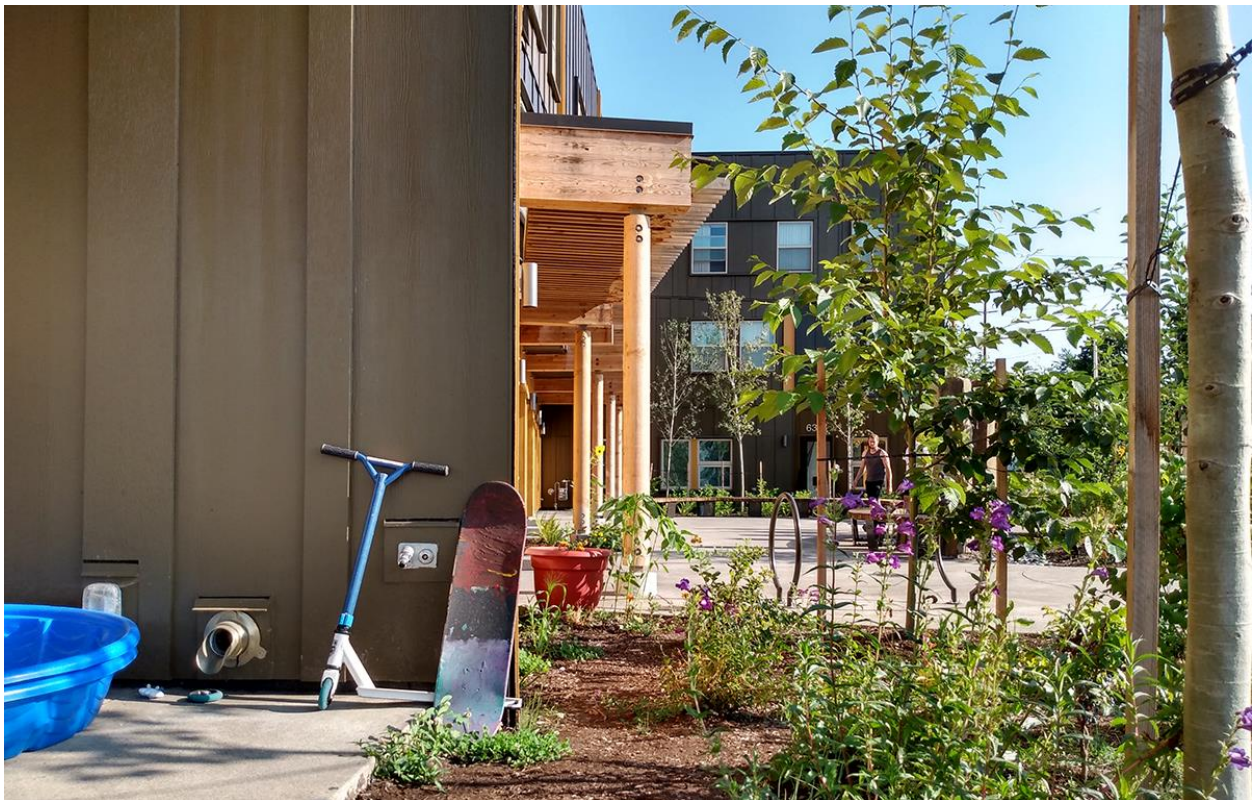
Native artwork adorns the building, curated in part by Siletz Housing Occupancy Specialist Isaac DeAndre. Walking through Nesika Illahee, tenants’ feet touch a heritage basketry pattern on the carpet. Stepping off the elevator, they see the salmon gill pattern that recalls centuries of culture, kinship and home.

“When I think about things that are healing or welcoming, I think about things that are part of our cultures,” Difuntorum said. “Those are the things that make me feel comfortable, and in a Native environment.”

She said it’s important for Native tenants to feel comfortable, and also for the building to have a visibly Native presence.

“It’s not just another building in Portland. There is no mistaking that that is a Native building,” she said.

The coronavirus pandemic slowed down the process of filling apartments, but the last tenants moved in by late June.



Nesika Illahee, at Northeast 42nd Avenue and Holman Street in Portland, features family-friendly patios and gardens. Photo by Brian Oaster

Now, thick cornstalks grow in the raised garden beds. Patios are peppered with footballs, skateboards and other signs of family life. Veterans chat in the sidewalk sun.

“The neighbors seem friendly,” said one veteran, Jason Dent, who moved into Nesika Illahee after six years of camping along the Springwater Corridor Trail, living with substance use disorder.

He and his fiancée moved into a corner one-bedroom apartment with almost no belongings after a veterans service connected Dent with the Native American Rehabilitation Association.

“We had an air mattress, a couple suitcases of clothes,” he said. “We were both kind of worried ‘cause we were both new in recovery, but (Nesika Illahee) keeps us connected with NARA through services.”

Dent said he’s part Choctaw, and his fiancée is enrolled with Siletz.

“Feeling like you’re part of a Native community is helpful for us,” he said. “There are lots of connections through the NARA bubble, and powwows. It makes it easier to feel comfortable in the neighborhood.”

“Moving here, I wanted to be around a bunch of Natives,” said Mario, another Siletz member and tenant at Nesika Illahee, who declined to give their last name. They said it’s nice to recognize neighbors from the Siletz community, and family connections. “I’m always trying to help in any way I can. If anyone needs help moving furniture, they can just call me.”

“A couple of us have swapped furniture because what we got didn’t work for us,” A.C. Ramírez said, laughing. Ramírez was also houseless, along with their 4-year-old daughter, before moving into Nesika Illahee.

“I had a really short table that my neighbor needed because they have a 2-year old that was falling off the chair, and I wanted a taller table ‘cause I’m in a wheelchair and I can get under it better.”

Ramírez added that they pitch in by weeding and picking up trash, expressions of community care that they said don’t normally emerge in apartment living.

“There’s a comfort level when you’re living amongst your people,” Ramírez said. “We come from a variety of tribal nations, from Alaska down to the Caribbean.” Ramírez is Taino Higuayagua. “So we’ve got a bunch of different cultures in here. But to have that basic cultural understanding that we’re not going to have if I’m just randomly in some big apartment complex somewhere, and there’s not Native folks around, it’s just more comfortable. It facilitates individual healing, and it also facilitates a cultural, community healing to be by folks who are all working for that same goal. We’re all trying to heal

ourselves, and by doing so, we're healing our community. And when we have difficulty, we can rely on the folks here to understand that and to help us."

Angelique Saxton, an addiction counselor with NARA, works onsite to provide resident services. She helps facilitate community meetings at least twice a month, and a recovery talking circle once a week. She also helps tenants write résumés and cover letters, reaches out to tribes for information residents might need, and supports the community in a variety of other capacities.

"People are very into it, and they're asking for more," Saxton said. COVID-19 forced the temporary closure of Nesika Illahee's community room, but gatherings have moved to Zoom, and tenants have taken to the internet to share cultural knowledge, like how to prepare elderberry syrup and other medicines from their garden beds. "We have a beautiful community garden here," Saxton said.

"I can't say enough about NARA. I wasn't a big fan of the recovery thing," Dent said, recalling when he began the process, "but NARA has a full package."

All three tenants who spoke to Street Roots mentioned they're getting food boxes delivered to their doors, courtesy of NAYA, NARA, veterans services and other service providers.

"There's people who call me like three times a week to check in with me, to see how we're doing," said Ramírez. If they need anything, like children's Tylenol, Ramírez hops on the tenant-organized Facebook group to ask who's going to the store that day.

"And being in a brand-new apartment?" Dent said, laughing. "I've never been in a brand-new apartment! That no one's ever lived in? Are you kidding me?" He said he doesn't sleep on an air mattress anymore, but now feels like he has "an apartment."

Dent admitted he's still getting used to being indoors, and he almost expects something to go wrong. But he said it feels like people are trying to make sure he doesn't slide back into houselessness.

His fiancée popped out to announce that she was making chicken burritos. "It's been a steady increase in my quality of life," Dent said. "Everything's been a lot better. It's a real blessing."

"We're a family here," Ramírez said. "And there's so many aunties here that I know if my daughter is doing something naughty, one of her aunties is gonna say, 'I don't think so!'"



Patios at Nesika Illahee invite residents to sit and relax. Photo by Brian Oaster

Overlooking Northeast 42nd Avenue, a mural called *Katamí Átlawish* (Grandmother’s Prayers), by Yakama artist Toma Villa, depicts the placid face of a Siletz grandmother holding cedar smudge in an abalone shell.

Difuntorum explained that in Native cultures, women, especially aunts and grandmothers, have a special place in families and in society. “This is like the grandmother watching over everyone in the building,” she said of the mural.

Duplicating the model

“The purpose of Nesika Illahee was first and foremost creating this model, this business model, and doing something that hadn’t been done in Oregon,” Difuntorum said. Now that they have proof-of-concept, both NAYA and the Confederated Tribes of Siletz Indians have plans to duplicate the model. Their next project together, Mamook Tokatee (Making Beauty), just broke ground for construction less than a mile away.

MAMOOK TOKATEE: [Native artists will soon have a new home in the Cully neighborhood](#)

“The model that this creates is for the rest of the country,” said Multnomah County Commissioner Susheela Jayapal at Nesika Illahee’s opening in January. “This development and the new developments that are coming are really a bulwark against the displacement that this neighborhood has experienced. This has been ground zero for displacement of communities of color. It is developments like this that will allow us to keep those communities here where they belong.”

NAYA has plans for a third housing project, Hayu Tilixam (Many Nations) on Northeast Prescott Street, with construction beginning early next year. Difuntorum says the Confederated Tribes of Siletz Indians hope to replicate the housing model in other parts of Oregon.

“It wasn’t just this one project and this one structure,” she said. “It was creating a path to be able to duplicate this again in other areas where we also have a high Indigenous population that have a housing need.”

Difuntorum said that while the macro impact is hard to measure, this housing model has been life changing for resident families.

“I think the impact to individual households has been pretty phenomenal,” she said.

“It’s a huge success,” Arana said. “We’re really happy. It really speaks to the strength of the team coming together, doing something innovative.”

Street Roots is an award-winning, weekly publication focusing on economic, environmental and social justice issues. The newspaper is sold in Portland, Oregon, by people experiencing homelessness and/or extreme poverty as means of earning an income with dignity. Street Roots newspaper operates independently of Street Roots advocacy and is a part of the Street Roots organization. [Learn more about Street Roots.](#) Support your community newspaper by [making a one-time or recurring gift today.](#)

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