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THE BUILD

A Chicago Building Gives Blind Tenants Newfound Independence

The Foglia Residences, a nine-story, 76-unit affordable housing unit designed for people who are blind and visually impaired, opened in the fall of 2024.

By Sonia A. Rao; **Photographs by** Jamie Kelter Davis

For years, Juliana Ajayi had searched for housing in Chicago that fit all her needs: safe, affordable, close to public transit and employment opportunities, and accessible for people with visual impairments, like herself.

She finally found it in the Foglia Residences, a nine-story, 76-unit building in Chicago's Illinois Medical District, built specifically for people who are blind and visually impaired. It was financed in part by Low-Income Housing Tax Credits and built on the property of The Chicago Lighthouse, a nonprofit that provides services for the blind and visually impaired. The City of Chicago also funded a portion of the project.

Developers say the building, which opened in October 2024 and has been fully occupied since March 2025, is one of the first of its kind in the country, and they hope it acts as a model for future buildings.

Previously, Ms. Ajayi, who is legally blind and can see blurry shapes and some color and light, lived in a housing community for blind people in Chicago that provided meals, housekeeping and other living services.



In Ms. Ajayi and Mr. Turrentine's kitchen, lighting underneath the cabinets assists Ms. Ajayi with seeing what she is cooking. Credit: Jamie Kelter Davis for The New York Times



The Foglia Residences, a nine-story, 76-unit affordable housing unit for the blind and visually impaired, is designed to look like a lighthouse, with a corner of the building lighting up at night. Credit: Jamie Kelter Davis for The New York Times

She loved living there, but she missed her independence — being able to buy her own groceries, do her own laundry and cook in her own kitchen. When she and her fiancé, Robert Turrentine, who is fully blind, heard about the Foglia Residences, they immediately applied. They moved into their one-bedroom apartment when the building opened.

“I want to live like I used to live when I had vision,” Ms. Ajayi said, “and I feel like this is the closest that I can get to that.”

Customized lighting underneath her cabinets allows Ms. Ajayi to see her countertops better and cook her favorite dishes, including chicken potpie, lasagna and smothered lamb chops.

Their apartment also has black light switches that contrast with the light walls. The floors in their living room, bedroom and bathroom are different textures, which helps Mr. Turrentine know where he is. There are railings in the hallways, the elevators have a voice system and most signs in the building are lit, which makes them easier to read, in addition to being translated into Braille.

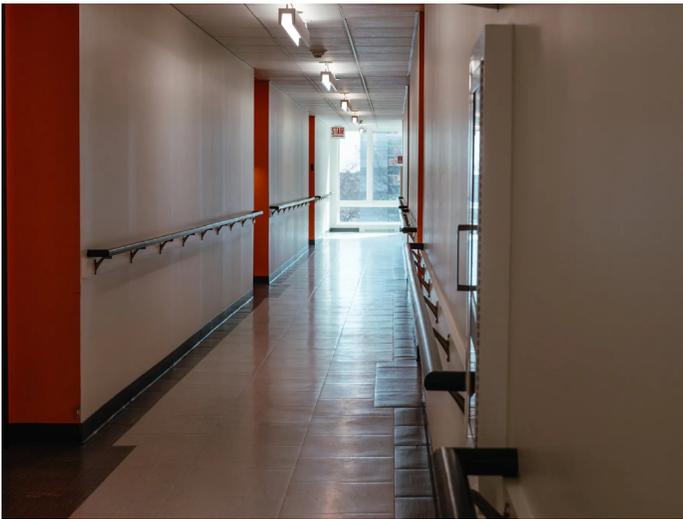
These are just some of the features that LBBA Architects designed into the Foglia. The architecture firm consulted with Chris Downey, a blind architect who designs buildings for people who are visually impaired. Mr. Downey reviewed the project through three-dimensional drawings and visited the space in person, recommending minor adjustments, including that doorways be clearly marked by bright colors and by flooring with different textures.



In Ms. Ajayi and Mr. Turrentine’s kitchen, lighting underneath the cabinets assists Ms. Ajayi with seeing what she is cooking. Credit: Jamie Kelter Davis for The New York Times



Apartment numbers for each unit are translated into Braille and are lit up so they are easier to see. Credit: Jamie Kelter Davis for The New York Times



Railings in the hallways and darker flooring and walls near doorways help blind residents navigate the Foglia Credit: Jamie Kelter Davis for The New York Times



A rooftop patio at the Foglia, which also has a community room and fitness center.

While the building caters to people who are blind, it is also accessible to people with other disabilities, including those with mobility impairments. “You can bet if it’s going to work well for a blind person, it’s going to work well for everybody else to navigate,” said Mr. Downey.

At least 70 percent of tenants at the Foglia have a disability. Around half of units have roll-in showers for wheelchair users, and several units were set aside for veterans. Most of the changes needed to make the building accessible were inexpensive and easy to do, said Jack Schroeder, a principal at the LBBA Architects.

Monthly rents for studios, one-bedrooms and two-bedrooms range from around \$1,050 to \$1,750, although some units are subsidized through the city’s housing voucher program.

Ms. Ajayi, 45, and Mr. Turrentine, 50, live off fixed social security disability payments. For them and many other disabled people who often experience barriers to employment, it can be difficult to afford housing. Both Ms. Ajayi and Mr. Turrentine have experienced bouts of homelessness in the past.

“This is really the only independent apartment building that we have come across,” she said. “We finally got ourselves a safe, nice, clean, adequate home catered to our needs, to the needs of blind people.”

David Brint, co-founder of Brinshore Development, the Illinois-based affordable housing developer that spearheaded the project, came up with the idea after working for years in the community, including serving on the board of the Chicago Lighthouse — his son, Alan, was born blind.

“We’d love to see this happen in other communities,” Mr. Brint said. “I think most mid- to large-size cities have a sizable population that has visual impairments that could benefit from this kind of community.”

“We’re talking to a few already,” he added.

Rachel Arfa, commissioner of the Chicago Mayor’s Office for People with Disabilities, who is deaf, said she hopes projects like the Foglia help diversify where disabled people in the city are able to live. She pointed to a recent study her office published that indicated people with disabilities in Chicago tend to live in lower-income neighborhoods.

“People with disabilities should have options in what kind of housing, what kind of neighborhoods they want to live in,” she said.

David Hespel, 51, who has no sight in his right eye and blurry vision in his left eye, previously lived in an apartment in Oak Park, Ill. In addition to being easier to live in, he said the Foglia is also closer to where he works as a medical scheduler at the University of Illinois Hospital and Health Sciences System, which partners with the Chicago Lighthouse to provide employment opportunities.

Previously, he took the city’s paratransit services to work, which were unreliable and often took over an hour with traffic.

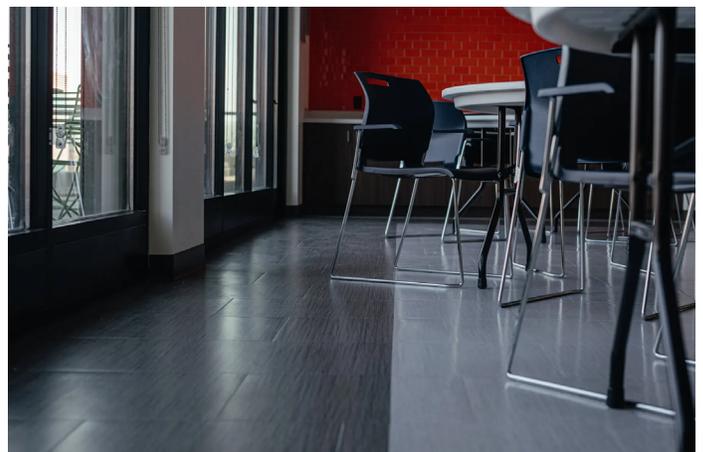
“I never thought I would ever think about living in a place like this,” he said. “I didn’t know it could even exist.”



David Hespel, 51, is a resident at the Foglia and works nearby as a medical scheduler at the University of Illinois Hospital and Health Sciences System. Credit: Jamie Kelter Davis for The New York Times



Many walls at the Foglia Residences are decorated with Braille wallpaper. Credit: Jamie Kelter Davis for The New York Times



Contrasting floor colors are one way residents of the Foglia distinguish where they are in the building. Credit: Jamie Kelter Davis for The New York Times



Olivia Cichowlas, a resident of the Foglia who is legally blind, and her guide dog. Credit: Jamie Kelter Davis for The New York Times



Olivia Cichowlas chose a textured painting of a cow to decorate her living room area. Credit: Jamie Kelter Davis for The New York Times

Olivia Cichowlas, 25, a tenant who is legally blind, has a degree in environmental studies and is currently searching for a job. When she first moved back to Chicago, she lived with her mother in the suburbs, where she felt isolated. She worried about how she would afford to live in the city.

“The more time passed, the more hope I kind of lost,” she said. She was close to giving up on the dream of living in Chicago on her own, until she heard of the Foglia and moved in last fall. Now, she’s paying subsidized rent — around \$268 a month — while on the job hunt.

“When I heard about this, all I heard was ‘independence,’” she said. “I could just see myself as being so free, and that is what has happened since I’ve moved here.”