

## A New Look and a New Lease for Stewartown Homes

By Barbara Ruben

Special to The Washington Post

Saturday, August 3, 2002; Page T05

Edie Kowalczyk moved to Stewartown Homes in Gaithersburg in 1978, a year after the community of 94 subsidized townhouses opened. By the time she left in 1992, the sidewalks had begun to crumble and the roofs to sag. Drug use and sales were common.

"There were big-time problems with drugs and crime. Your children could not go out alone," she said of the deteriorating complex that she recalls looked like barracks.

But last summer, when Kowalczyk visited Stewartown Homes again, she was astounded. Renovations to the interior and exterior of each unit were nearly complete. New siding and the addition of porticos spruced up the outside, while kitchen and bath renovations and new wall-to-wall carpeting, washing machines, dryers and dishwashers improved the inside.

Best of all, she said, more law-abiding residents had moved in.

"It was so quiet, I was totally shocked. I couldn't believe it," she said. "Somehow the place didn't have a homey look before. Now it looks like home."

It looked so inviting, in fact, that Kowalczyk moved back last November and now works at Stewartown as a leasing consultant.

Other residents are as enthusiastic about the transformation.

"It's 1,000 percent better. It's just great," said Doris Plummer, who moved to Stewartown in 1988. "I'm proud of this community now. Before, I admit, I was a little ashamed to say I lived here."

Stewartown's \$11.8 million facelift began soon after the Housing Opportunities Commission, which owns and finances housing for low- and moderate-income Montgomery County residents, bought the complex in 1999.

In May, the National Association of Housing and Redevelopment Officials presented the commission with an award in the community revitalization category for developing Stewartown Homes and three other properties.

### STEWARTOWN HOMES

9310 Merust Lane  
Gaithersburg, Md. 20879  
301-840-1998

- **Application fee:** None
- **Security deposit:** Half of one month's rent
- **Income requirements:** Minimums and maximums apply to all units
- **Utilities:** Residents pay for electricity and gas
- **Amenities:** Computer room, children's activities and educational help, playground, individual patios, washer and dryer in each unit.
- **Parking:** Free, reserved surface parking
- **Pet policy:** None allowed

### APARTMENT SIZE SQUARE FEET MONTHLY RENTAL

2 BR/1.5 BA  
866  
\$684 to \$814

3 BR/1.5 BA  
1,002  
\$754 to \$901

4 BR/1.5 BA  
1,112  
\$840 to \$1,005

Today, instead of throwing trash on their lawns, residents are planting gardens and landscaping the areas in front of their units.

"Residents feel good about being here now. They put out flowers and try to make the place look good," said Claudia Mendez, Stewartown Homes' community manager.

It's not just residents who have noticed the change but those who live in neighboring houses and even those just driving by, she said. Most don't realize that Stewartown is subsidized housing and are surprised to hear of income requirements and a waiting list that can stretch to 2 1/2 years for the two-bedroom units, Mendez said.

There are also three- and four-bedroom townhouses; each has 1 1/2 baths.

Financed with help from the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development through what's known as Section 236, rents are significantly below market rate. Top rent for a four-bedroom townhouse, for example, is \$1,005. A family of six in a four-bedroom unit must have an annual household income between \$36,000 and \$60,540 to qualify.

In addition to fresh paint and appliances in the apartments, each is now wired for computer use. In September, a central network with access to the Internet will be installed, and each apartment will be equipped with a computer. The project, overseen by the Community Preservation and Development Corp., is the second of its kind in the Washington area. The corporation has already launched a similar project in the mixed-income Edgewood Terrace complex in Northeast Washington, which has more than 800 units.

In addition, a computer center in Stewartown's Family Resource Center will offer computer help to schoolchildren, as well as adults. Over the summer, the resource center houses a free day camp for 30 children who live at Stewartown. Teachers from nearby Whetstone Elementary School also work with the students each morning to help boost their academic skills.

Throughout the school year, homework help, games and field trips are offered to the more than 95 children living at Stewartown. A male mentoring program helps boys who live with their single mothers. New playground equipment has also been installed.

Other services are provided to residents. Each week, Manna delivers free bread. A social services worker for the Housing Opportunities Commission helps residents with a variety of problems, such as finding emergency funds and helping with job searches and child care.

"All my friends and family, they brag on this place now," Plummer said. "Everyone has something positive to say."

© 2002 The Washington Post Company