

Affordable-housing apartments open in Orange

Eunice Lee/The Star-Ledger

ORANGE — She's a full-time student, but Shavon Gray doesn't have a desk. Her living room is missing a comfy couch to plop down on — so far it's just a simple glass dining table with four chairs in the middle of an otherwise bare hardwood floor.

For eight years, she has bounced between friends, relatives and homeless shelters. Now the single mother and her 7-month-old daughter, Rebecca Gray-Evans, finally have a place to call home.

"Now I enjoy telling my daughter, 'Welcome home. Welcome home, Rebecca,'" Gray, 26, said. Their new home is at Grand Central, an affordable-housing apartment building in Orange that celebrated its grand opening last week.

The gleaming, \$14 million four-story building at South Center Street and Central Avenue received high praise from local and state officials on Wednesday.

"I'm in awe of how it sets off this corner that was so desolate for so long," Orange City Council President Tency Eason said. The land formerly was used to house nuns for a nearby church.

The 70 apartment units clearly are a cut above bare-minimum housing, said Lori Grifa, commissioner of the state Department of Community Affairs.

"I've taken a tour of the building and it's beautiful," Grifa said at the celebration of the building's completion.

Residents get stainless steel appliances, walnut wood cabinets and hardwood floors. In the building foyer, colorful light fixtures hang from a high ceiling and large windows flood the space with natural light. Grifa has seen a lot of affordable housing and said, "Not all of them are created equal."



Jerry McCrea/The Star-LedgerShavon Gray, of Orange, 26, sometimes studies on the floor while caring for her daughter, Rebecca, 7 months, at her apartment in Orange. She is a new resident at Grand Central Apartments.

Grand Central also is the state's first Climate Choice building, meaning it has renewable energy and conservation features that rank it a level better than the international Energy Star standard. The DCA and the state Housing and Mortgage Finance Agency provided \$8 million, or more than half the funds for the apartments, through loans and subsidies. The project also received funding from multiple sources, from the federal level down to the city.

Grand Central targets residents with incomes under \$48,000, said director of city planning Valerie Jackson. Monthly rates are \$735 to \$900 for a one-bedroom unit and \$895 to \$1,070 for a two-bedroom. Residents apply to the building's developer, RPM Development Group of Montclair, which also handles leasing.

Ten of the units are for homeless military veterans like Gray, who served in the Navy until 2003, when she said she left due to medical reasons.

While they are impressed with Grand Central, some city officials worry that Orange may be building too much affordable housing.

"I think enough is enough. Orange has its fair share of affordable housing," said Councilman-at-large Elroy Corbitt.

Orange needs ratables to help fill city coffers, he said, and "we have to dangle a carrot out there for developers, and unfortunately that carrot is affordable housing."

Councilman-at-large Rayfield Morton said building attractive affordable housing while tearing down longtime housing projects has displaced many Orange natives. They had long histories of up to 70 years in the city, he said.



daughter, Rebecca, 7 months, at her apartment.

Jerry McCrea/The Star-LedgerShavon Gray, of Orange, 26, with her

"I'm not one to forget the people who were here. So all the nice buildings are coming up, and people from other towns ... are coming and enjoying them. I'm still looking at the people who were displaced and want to come back," Morton said.

Irving Mincey, 51, is one of those people from outside the city. A homeless veteran, he came to Orange after spending nights at the Hoboken train station.

He's struggled to keep a job and housing after leaving the Army due to an injury. Mincey said his spine was fractured when he was thrown from a Jeep.

He said he's looking forward to finally sleeping with "both eyes shut." As a diabetic, he kept his insulin in a backpack, which was stolen more than once. For now, the only thing in his new apartment is an air mattress, but Mincey says he 's working on that.

"I'm trying to get a bedroom set. Piece by piece," he said.