

INSIGHT

Saving a one-of-a-kind healthcare landmark

Renovating an architecturally-significant skilled nursing and rehab facility requires careful planning and creativity.

Advocate Healthcare of East Boston (AHEB), formerly the Don Orione Home, is a unique property. Perched on a hilltop, overlooking a religious shrine and with dramatic views of Boston and Boston Harbor, AHEB is the area's only skilled nursing and rehabilitation facility and an important community asset. An extraordinary example of mid-20th century modernism, complete with a Corbusier-inspired chapel, it is eligible to be listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

In 2015, Advocate Healthcare Management (AHM) partnered with the Sons of Divine Providence, owners of Don Orione, to manage and improve the facility's resident-centered care. After purchasing the property in 2017, AHM's challenges were to:

- Reconfigure its array of healthcare services to insure long-term financial sustainability.
- Bring the site up to 21st century health and environmental standards.
- Create a resident-centered, modified "small-house" design concept within the current building footprint.
- Preserve the building's mid-century modern design.
- Accomplish all of the above without major disruptions to residents.

"The former Don Orione Home is an impressive venue for a skilled nursing facility," says Michael Walsh, founding partner of AHM. "Managing the facility, then taking ownership, has enabled us to positively impact its residents' lives while addressing the needs of a skilled nursing facility that's so important to the community of East Boston."

Rescuing a skilled nursing facility in decline

Built in 1953 and renovated during the 1960s, an era when hospital and nursing home construction boomed, the Don Orione Home provided much needed skilled-nursing and rehabilitation services to the residents of East Boston, Winthrop and Revere.



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Like many other homes providing primarily Medicaid services, by 2010 Don Orione was barely surviving in an ever-changing, competitive long-term care environment. Years of deferred maintenance led to the sprawling building’s decayed infrastructure. “It will take a miracle to turn around the Don Orione,” noted a priest at the facility. Fortunately, deferred maintenance also meant the integrity of the original mid-century architecture remains remarkably intact.

In 2015, AHM took over management of Don Orione; two years later (and after turning the facility around financially), AHM purchased the property and renamed it Advocate Healthcare of East Boston. The company invested more than \$500,000 in existing building enhancements and launched a \$9 million restoration and modernization construction project. The facility provides care to individuals with needs ranging from skilled nursing, rehabilitation, and long-term care to palliative/hospice care and adult day health services. AHM is renovating the facility in

phases and sub-phases; its contemporary nursing units are inspired by small-house design.

“The building is an architectural gem but doesn’t currently meet the modern needs of a long-term care and rehabilitation facility,” says Walsh. “That’s why we’ve invested in updating the building and have pulled together the necessary financing to preserve its historic integrity while bringing it up to contemporary standards.”

Introducing the small-house design concept

AHEB’s new interiors will reflect the small-house design concept, an alternative to traditional institutional care settings. Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, nursing homes with low staffing ratios, infection control violations and safety concerns drove individuals and families to seek alternative care situations. Facilities utilizing small-house design feature residential design elements that create a more familial setting while offering a safer living environment for residents needing rehabilitation or nursing home levels of care.



Designing AHEB's future

AHEB's current design—two floors with long corridors of two, three and four-bed rooms, with a single nursing station on each floor interspersed with a wing of administrative offices, is being replaced with decentralized nursing and sub-nursing stations along with living and residential spaces containing dining areas. The building will be brought up to current building codes as well as the Massachusetts Department of Public Health's Standards for Long-Term Care Facilities. Existing triple and quad beds with no toilets and showers will be converted to private and semi-private rooms with bathrooms including European-style showers. On the ground floor, improvements will include a new accessible entry, reception area, lobby, rehabilitation therapy area and a hair salon, all in proximity to AHEB's newly opened Adult Day Health Center.

Extensive envelope and HVAC upgrades—including replacing all exterior windows—will provide better heating and cooling, as well as fresh air intake, to increase the comfort and health of residents, visitors and staff while reducing operating costs.

Future plans

Construction crews and social distancing inserted within an environment containing the most vulnerable, aging and frail populations will be carefully planned for and monitored on a daily basis to help this project succeed.

Pivotal to financing and achieving their ambitious program, AHM is pursuing historic tax credits to finance AHEB's restoration through the Massachusetts Historical Commission and the National Park Service, attempting to balance the demands of a heavily regulated nursing care facility while maintaining AHEB's unique character.

The team assembled by AHM to accomplish the renovation includes: JSA Design, architecture; The Aspen Group, owner's representative; Epsilon Associates, Inc., preservation consultants; and VAV International, Inc., HVAC engineers. Advice and assistance were provided by engineering consultants specializing in healthcare and complex building renovation as well as from Massachusetts' Division of Health Care Facility Licensure and Certification.

"Advocate Healthcare Management of East Boston is a prime example of the transformation that can happen at a skilled nursing facility," says Walsh. "Our goal is to address the facility's wide-ranging needs and transition it from good to great."

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Established in 1980, JSA Design is an architecture, planning and interior design firm headquartered in Portsmouth, NH. JSA's design and planning specialties include senior living, healthcare, education, affordable housing, interior design, and adaptive re-use. Connect with JSA on LinkedIn, Instagram or online at jsainc.com.

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