

Terwilliger Center for Housing



The name “PAH!”—an expression in American Sign Language that signifies success or fulfillment—embodies the decades-long journey of the Deaf community in New Mexico to create a residential space that addresses their specific needs. (Patrick Coulie Photography Inc.)

CASE STUDY: PAH! HILAND PLAZA

ALBUQUERQUE, NEW MEXICO

LOCATION:

5000 Central Avenue SE
Albuquerque, New Mexico

PROJECT TYPE:

Multifamily affordable housing

UNITS:

92 units

SIZE:

1.59 acres

COST:

\$23,819,403

COMPLETION DATE:

August 2023

OWNER:

Hiland Plaza Apartments Limited
Partnership LLLP

DEVELOPER:

Sol Housing

PARTNERS:

Deaf Culture Center of New Mexico; Hartman + Majewski Design Group; City of Albuquerque Department of Health, Housing, and Homelessness; Housing New Mexico/New Mexico Mortgage Finance Authority; Albuquerque Housing Authority; Jaynes Corporation; Monarch Properties Inc.

INVESTOR:

Raymond James Affordable Housing Investments

LENDER:

PNC Bank

OPERATOR:

Monarch Properties Inc.

PROJECT WEBSITE:

<https://www.pahhiland.com>

CONTACTS:

Ketan Bharatiya, Principal Architect, Hartman + Majewski Design Group;
Laurie Frappier, Director of Community Relations, Sol Housing



PAH is a major redevelopment project in Albuquerque's Nob Hill neighborhood. (Google Maps)

Project Overview

PAH! Hiland Plaza (PAH), located on Historic Route 66 in Albuquerque, New Mexico, represents a groundbreaking advancement in affordable, inclusive housing. This mixed-use, multifamily housing community is specifically designed to meet the needs of the Deaf, DeafBlind, and Hard-of-Hearing households. PAH is the largest housing development in the nation serving the Deaf community and the only one designed to accommodate households with children.

Developed through a collaboration between Sol Housing and the Deaf Culture Center of New Mexico (DCCNM), the project features 92 apartment units, modern amenities, and community spaces tailored to promote accessibility and inclusivity.

The name “PAH!”—an expression in American Sign Language (ASL) that signifies success or fulfillment—embodies the decades-long journey of the Deaf community in New Mexico to create a residential space that addresses their specific needs. This innovative development opened its doors in August 2023 and achieved full occupancy by December 2023, with a waitlist exceeding 100 households.

Planning and Design

Streamline Moderne and its strong horizontal elements is one of the most distinctive architectural styles along Albuquerque's stretch of Route 66 in the Nob Hill/Highland business districts. PAH's long bands of colored stucco, metal awnings, and window groupings, plus small step-backs and curved corners adopt this style, blending in easily with the neighborhood's character.



The four-story, 79,758-square-foot, L-shaped building contains 92 mixed-income units. The project added a distinct urban edge by creating wide, tree-lined sidewalks along Central Avenue (Route 66) and Jackson Street. (Courtesy of Sol Housing)

The four-story, 79,758-square-foot, L-shaped building contains 92 one-, two-, and three-bedroom mixed-income units. The project added a distinct urban edge by creating wide, tree-lined sidewalks along Central Avenue (Route 66) and Jackson Street. The building on the 1.59-acre site contains a density of 61 dwelling units per acre.

All 92 units share comparable design and amenities, regardless of income. Each unit features in-unit washers and dryers, full-size appliances, refrigerated air, window coverings, and ample outlets for videophones or home offices. The Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) Platinum and Energy Star certified building includes Energy Star appliances, high-efficiency electric heat pumps, and extra insulation to help cut energy costs for residents. A free electric vehicle charging station is located in the secure parking area. There are also

two electric car-share vehicles outside for residents and the wider community.

Secure resident parking is located behind the building, along with a gated area with a private entry, children’s play areas, a dog park, a futsal court, and a walking loop. Street parking is also available on Jackson Street and Silver Avenue. The ground floor houses the leasing office, resident amenities, and commercial space leased by the DCCNM. An elevator provides access to all floors. The main entrance is accessible via an elevated plaza.

Key to the design process was active collaboration with the DCCNM, whose input ensured the inclusion of features such as open sightlines, minimal visual barriers, and ample indoor glazing to facilitate ASL communication.



The level of accessibility at PAH! Hiland Plaza is important for housing stability, especially during a housing crisis caused mostly by the limited supply of available housing.”

— MIRIAM HICKS, DIRECTOR OF HOUSING DEVELOPMENT, SOL HOUSING

NAVIGATING ZONING AND LAND USE REGULATIONS

Managing compliance with zoning and land use regulations was a pivotal aspect of the PAH development. Particularly as a mixed-use, affordable housing development, the project required modifications to existing zoning codes.

The site for PAH, zoned as a mixed-use district, also includes a historic character overlay that includes specific window and glazing requirements. This designation imposed strict aesthetic standards aimed at preserving the architectural style of the neighborhood, specifically that 60 percent of the ground-floor facade must consist of windows. This requirement seeks to ensure that new buildings align with the character of the surrounding area.

However, the project plans for wood-framed construction could not accommodate that percentage of glazing without compromising structural integrity and energy efficiency. Achieving the mandated 60 percent glazing ratio would have necessitated substantial design modifications or the use of more costly materials, making the project financially unviable.

The development team tackled this issue by working closely with municipal authorities to secure

a variance. This variance reduced the glazing requirement to 40 percent, a more achievable target for the wood-framed structure.

Additionally, window sill heights were regulated to a maximum of 30 inches under zoning codes, but building safety standards necessitated higher sill heights of 36 inches to manage fall protection requirements. These conflicting mandates required the development team to pursue a variance to balance safety with the building’s functional expectations.

Another hurdle involved deviations from standard fence height requirements. While zoning codes limited fences facing the street to 3 feet, the project obtained a deviation to construct 42-inch railings for resident patios. This change addressed safety concerns due to the site’s grading while maintaining a visually appealing streetscape.

Additionally, the development team successfully secured a waiver for sidewalk width requirements. Mixed-use zoning typically mandates 10-foot-wide sidewalks, but along the residential edge of the property, this width was unnecessary. Reducing the sidewalk width to 6 feet along these areas provided a practical solution without compromising accessibility.

ACCESSIBILITY FEATURES

PAH adheres to universal design principles, ensuring that all residents, regardless of ability, can navigate and enjoy their living environment. This level of accessibility is particularly important for housing stability during a housing crisis triggered primarily by a shortage of available housing. Features such as wide hallways, strategically placed seating areas near elevators, and open layouts ensure accessibility for individuals with mobility challenges.

Lighting and paint colors are selected to ease visual strain and glare, community spaces minimize visual obstructions, and the entire development is rooted in universal design principles emphasizing Deaf accessibility.

Examples of the accessibility features tailored to the Deaf community include the following:

- ASL-proficient staff;
- Videophone-enabled secure entries;
- Visual fire alarms and doorbells in every apartment to ensure residents are aware of visitors or emergencies;
- Apartments with wide doorways, low thresholds, and strategically placed outlets designed to accommodate bed shakers that can be triggered by fire alarms, maximizing safety and independence for residents; and
- T-coil induction loops installed in key community spaces, such as the leasing office and lounge areas. T-coil induction loops provide a direct, high-quality audio feed to hearing aids and cochlear implants equipped with a telecoil setting, reducing background noise and improving sound clarity.

COMMUNITY SPACES AND AMENITIES

Amenities include a playground, futsal court, private dog park, indoor pet washing station, computer lab, and indoor bike storage. In addition, ASL-fluent services remove the language barrier and social isolation that is typical in hearing-oriented environments. An onsite ASL-fluent enrichment

service coordinator brings many inclusive events including CPR training with a native ASL speaker and teen programs and after-school tutoring for all levels of hearing. ASL-focused services also help residents with health screenings, Medicaid enrollment, nutrition education, and technology support for both students and adults.

Thoughtfully designed community spaces encourage social interaction and inclusivity. The second-floor lounge is a favorite gathering spot, while a large community room that can host group events is available to reserve at no charge to residents and offers a kitchen, seating, and a large TV. There is also a computer lab equipped with accessible technology.

Each of these spaces was designed to be both functional and inviting, fostering a strong sense of community. Dimmable LED lighting throughout the property was carefully selected to minimize glare and hotspots, enhancing comfort and usability for all residents.

On the ground floor, the DCCNM also rents commercial space, offering statewide Deaf services, hosting community events, and running a business incubation program.

Community Engagement

Community engagement was a cornerstone of PAH's success. The DCCNM actively participated in the planning process, hosting town halls and workshops to gather input from potential residents and stakeholders. Their contributions shaped critical aspects of the design, from lighting and finishes to unit layouts.

Leasing policies prioritize households with Deaf, DeafBlind, and Hard-of-Hearing members, though all income-qualified individuals are welcome. This approach fosters a vibrant, inclusive community while addressing housing disparities among marginalized groups.

PARTNERSHIP WITH THE DCCNM

The partnership between Sol Housing and the DCCNM was instrumental in shaping PAH into a model of inclusivity and cultural sensitivity. This collaboration began in the early stages of planning, with the DCCNM serving both as a consultant and as an advocate for the needs of Deaf, DeafBlind, and Hard-of-Hearing individuals.

The DCCNM facilitated a series of community meetings and town halls to gather direct feedback from prospective residents, ensuring the project addressed their unique challenges. These discussions informed critical design decisions, including the placement of visual alert systems, the incorporation of open layouts for ASL communication, and the selection of dimmable lighting, low-reflective surfaces, and nonglare task lighting. Additionally, the DCCNM played a vital role in guiding the development of community spaces, ensuring they fostered interaction while respecting privacy.

The partnership also extended to marketing and outreach efforts. The DCCNM helped craft culturally appropriate messaging and connected the development team with broader Deaf networks, ensuring that PAH reached its intended audience. This collaborative approach not only enriched the project but also strengthened trust between the development team and the Deaf community.

Furthermore, the DCCNM provided training for the third-party property management staff to enhance their understanding of Deaf culture and communication methods. This initiative ensured that on-site personnel were equipped to provide exceptional service to residents, contributing to the project's success in creating a supportive and welcoming environment.



PAH benefited from regular feedback from the Deaf community, allowing the project to incorporate essential features such as open layouts for ASL communication. (Patrick Coulie Photography Inc.)

Community Context

Located at one end of the Nob Hill neighborhood, PAH is a major redevelopment project outlined by the Central/Highland/Upper Nob Hill Metropolitan Redevelopment Plan. This site was formerly the location of the Desert Sands Motel, which had burned down. The site was demolished and cleared in 2018.

Nob Hill is a historic, eclectic neighborhood popular since the 1950s. While luxury housing has increased in the last five years, much of Nob Hill still faces economic challenges, especially for racial minorities and people with disabilities. Although signs of gentrification are growing, a large part of the area is still underinvested, creating a chance for Sol Housing to build a mixed-use, affordable housing community with good access to transit and a revitalized neighborhood.

PAH uses both mobility and place-based strategies to help families reach local job centers and neighborhood amenities like daycare, schools, arts programs, shops, and health care services. Public transportation is free and close by. Silver Avenue's Bicycle Boulevard travels across Nob Hill, passing the University of New Mexico and Central New Mexico Community College before ending downtown at Presbyterian Hospital.

Construction Process

Construction on PAH began in May 2022 and reached completion in August 2023, a timeline reflective of careful planning and adaptability in the face of challenges. Jaynes Corporation, the general contractor, spearheaded the project with a commitment to quality and precision. Green Insight, the sustainability consultant, ensured that the project adhered to rigorous environmental standards, including achieving readiness for LEED for Homes V4 Platinum Certification.

Despite the complications posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, including supply chain disruptions and rising material costs, the project was delivered on budget and on schedule. Regular coordination between stakeholders, contractors, and consultants facilitated effective problem-solving and minimized delays.

Sustainability was a core priority during construction. High-performance insulation, energy-efficient HVAC systems, and solar panel readiness were integrated into the building to reduce energy consumption and enhance long-term affordability for residents.

These features also helped make the project eligible for federal 45L Energy Efficient Home Tax Credits. Furthermore, the construction process emphasized low water use, reduction of the heat island effect, waste reduction, and sourcing local materials to align with environmental goals. PAH is certified as both a LEED Platinum and an Energy Star building.

Safety and accessibility considerations were integrated into the construction phase to meet the needs of future residents. A variety of features were incorporated to create a welcoming and functional living environment, including the following:

- Wider, low-threshold doorways;
- Accessible ramps;
- Strategically placed safety systems;
- Removable cabinets;
- Operable controls within reach range;
- Additional clear floor space in all bathrooms;
- Blocking for grab bars in all tub/showers and at toilets; and
- Ample natural light, controlled by blinds.

The construction team also implemented measures to ensure the durability and longevity of these adaptations.

The collaborative nature of the project extended to the construction phase, where input from the DCCNM and future residents informed adjustments and refinements. This inclusive approach ensured that the final building met both practical needs and cultural expectations, setting a benchmark for specialized housing developments.

PAH! Hiland Plaza and Fair Housing

PAH! Hiland Plaza was designed to prioritize housing for Deaf, Hard-of-Hearing, and DeafBlind households, addressing a critical community need while navigating Fair Housing laws. These laws, governed by the federal Fair Housing Act, prohibit discrimination in housing based on race, color, religion, sex, disability, familial status, or national origin. While ensuring inclusivity, these regulations can present challenges for developments aiming to meet the specific needs of underserved populations.

To implement a preference for Deaf households, PAH relied on legal precedent set by the Apache ASL Trails case. Apache ASL Trails, a housing community in Tempe, Arizona, faced opposition from the U.S.

Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) in 2011 for prioritizing Deaf residents. HUD initially argued that such preferences violated Fair Housing laws. However, after extensive legal advocacy and community support, HUD dropped the case in 2014, establishing that housing preferences based on disability needs could be legally defensible when designed to meet a documented demand.

This resolution allowed PAH to adopt a leasing preference for Deaf, Hard-of-Hearing, and DeafBlind residents while ensuring compliance with Fair Housing regulations. The developers structured this preference to allow other income-qualified individuals to lease units if no qualified Deaf applicants were available. This balanced approach maintained inclusivity while addressing the specific needs of the Deaf community.

Costs and Financing

The \$23.8 million project was financed through a combination of public and private funding, demonstrating the replicability of this model. Key funding sources included the following:

- **Federal HOME Funds:** Allocated by HUD to support construction and affordability
- **Federal Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) Funds:** For work in the public right-of-way
- **Low-Income Housing Tax Credits (LIHTC):** 2021 allocation of 9 percent LIHTC allocated through the Housing New Mexico (also known as the New Mexico Mortgage Finance Authority)
- **Project-Based Vouchers:** From the Albuquerque Housing Authority, ensuring affordability for low-income households
- **Private Investments:** Partnering with institutions including Raymond James and PNC Bank



For our design team, it was really helpful to have the community in our office, engaging in discussions about their needs. It energized us to find innovative solutions tailored to their specific challenges.”

— DOUG MAJEWSKI, PRINCIPAL ARCHITECT, CEO, HARTMAN + MAJEWSKI DESIGN GROUP

Housing Affordability

The leasing preference at PAH for Deaf, DeafBlind, and Hard-of-Hearing households expands affordable housing opportunities for marginalized communities. Standard accessibility requirements do not adequately meet the needs or promote housing stability for Deaf, DeafBlind, and Hard-of-Hearing households.

The LIHTC regulations for the 91 affordable and one non-revenue units target deep affordability for an extended use period of 35 years, exceeding affordability minimums with 30, 50, 60, and 80 percent area median income (AMI) using the more flexible average income test.

PAH supports low and very low income (60–50 percent AMI) through the award of City of Albuquerque HOME funds and very low to extremely low income (50–30 percent AMI) households with 23 project-based vouchers from the Albuquerque Housing Authority.

Sol Housing retains a third-party property manager to document compliance and maintain affordability.

Amenities such as in-unit washers and dryers, energy-efficient appliances, and modern finishes ensure quality living standards that rival market-rate housing. Additionally, community spaces such as the second-floor lounge and a large community room enhance livability and foster social connections.

HOUSING AFFORDABILITY	NUMBER OF UNITS	PERCENTAGE	1 BR	2 BR	3+ BR
At or below 30% AMI	29	32	21	5	3
Between 31 and 60% AMI	17	18	13	2	2
Between 61 and 80% AMI	29	32	23	3	3
Between 81 and 120% AMI	16	17	10	4	2
Market rate (not income restricted) and other	1	1	1	–	–
Total units	92	100	68	14	10

PAH! HILAND PLAZA: PROJECT PRO FORMA

NAME	PAH! Hiland Plaza
LOCATION	5000 Central Avenue SE, Albuquerque, New Mexico
PROJECT TYPE	Multifamily affordable housing
NUMBER OF UNITS	92
SIZE	1.59 acres

SOURCE OF FUNDS		TOTAL (\$)	PER UNIT (\$)
Equity: 9% LIHTC	Allocation: Housing New Mexico/New Mexico Mortgage Finance Authority Equity partner: Raymond James Affordable Housing Investments	14,294,642	155,377
Hard debt	PNC Bank	3,900,000	42,391
Soft debt	City of Albuquerque pass-thru HUD HOME and CDGB	4,210,316	45,764
Soft debt	General partner/deferred fee	1,145,592	12,452
Grant	Deaf Culture Center of New Mexico	268,853	2,922
Total sources		23,819,403	258,907

USE OF FUNDS	TOTAL (\$) (FULL DEVELOPMENT)	TOTAL (\$) (RESIDENTIAL ONLY)
Acquisition (land and improvements)	100,000	100,000
Soft costs	3,357,943	3,344,790
Hard costs	18,861,460	18,366,089
Other costs	1,500,000	1,500,000
Total uses	23,819,403	23,310,879



The physical environment designed to support visual communication is an integral part of PAH, fostering a valuable and flourishing social environment. (Patrick Coulie Photography Inc.)

Marketing and Performance

Marketing efforts targeted the Deaf, DeafBlind, and Hard-of-Hearing communities through partnerships with organizations such as the National Association of the Deaf and local advocacy groups. Early engagement with the DCCNM helped prelease units and build trust within the community.

The property achieved 100 percent occupancy within four months of opening and continues to maintain a waitlist. Two of four property management staff are Deaf and a third is hearing, but fluent in ASL. On-site staff fluent in ASL and tailored enrichment services, such as health screenings and technology training, further distinguish PAH as a model of community-centric affordable housing. A key factor in the property performance—as well as building trust with the Deaf community—was to hire a member of the Deaf community for property management when lease-up started.

Lessons Learned

Engage target populations early. PAH benefited from continuous feedback from the Deaf community, allowing the project to incorporate essential features such as visual alerting systems and open layouts for ASL communication. This approach not only creates a functional living space but also builds trust and a sense of ownership among future residents.

Leverage partnerships. Collaboration with the DCCNM enriched the project's cultural and functional value. This partnership enabled the inclusion of tailored design elements, such as induction loops and accessible community spaces. Furthermore, working with financial and governmental institutions secured the funding necessary to bring the vision to life, showcasing the power of multisector collaboration.

Remove language barriers. The physical environment designed to support visual communication is an integral part of PAH. Combined with ASL-fluent staff and services for residents, these foundational features—especially in the shared community spaces—have created a valuable and flourishing social environment.

Align zoning and building codes. A critical lesson from the PAH project was the opportunity for the public sector to examine how to align building and zoning codes more effectively for compatibility. For example, the development faced challenges where building safety requirements mandated a 36-inch window sill height for fall protection—while zoning codes required a maximum of 30 inches. These misalignments required additional variances and prolonged approval processes. Streamlining and reconciling these codes at the local government level would reduce delays, lower costs, and make it easier to implement innovative, safe, and accessible designs in future housing projects.

The value of administrative approval. Aligning the building safety and zoning codes described above (with regard to window sill height) required a public hearing, rather than an administrative approval process. In this case, PAH was fortunate to have had neighborhood support. However, if there had been opposition to the affordable housing development, an extended public hearing and appeal process would have imposed a very costly delay to the project. The time and financial burden caused by these types of delays can kill a project, whereas administrative approvals can help expedite the process much more efficiently.

Balance universal and specific designs. While universal design principles ensure broad accessibility, addressing the unique needs of specific populations enhances inclusivity. For PAH, features such as strobe doorbells and minimal visual barriers were critical for Deaf residents, as well as promoting greater housing stability and reduced social isolation for marginalized populations with disabilities.

Innovate within constraints. The success of PAH highlights how innovative solutions can thrive within conventional financing structures. By utilizing LIHTCs and project-based vouchers, the development team created a sustainable and replicable model for specialized affordable housing.

Conclusion

PAH! Hiland Plaza stands as a beacon of innovation and inclusivity in affordable housing. By combining thoughtful design, sustainable practices, and community engagement, it addresses the unique needs of Deaf, DeafBlind, and Hard-of-Hearing residents while demonstrating replicable strategies for other developments. This landmark project not only provides a home but also fosters a thriving community, affirming that affordable housing can be both beautiful and functional.

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The extraordinary impact that ULI makes on land use decision-making is based on its members sharing expertise on a variety of factors affecting the built environment, including urbanization, demographic and population changes, new economic drivers, technology advancements, and environmental concerns.

Peer-to-peer learning is achieved through the knowledge shared by members at thousands of convenings each year that reinforce ULI's position as a global authority on land use and real estate. Each year, thousands of events, both virtual and in person, are held in cities around the world.

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About the Terwilliger Center

The mission of the Terwilliger Center for Housing is to ensure that everyone has a home that meets their needs at a price they can afford. Established in 2007 with a gift from longtime member and former ULI chairman J. Ronald Terwilliger, the Center's activities include technical assistance engagements, forums and convenings, research and publications, and an awards program. The goal is to catalyze the production and preservation of a full spectrum of housing options. [Learn more.](#)

Author: Deborah L. Myerson
Senior Research & Policy Fellow,
ULI Terwilliger Center for Housing

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20036-4948

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