

WORKING FOR AN INCLUSIVE COMMUNITY

HOPE NORTH CAROLINA'S MISSION TO EQUITABLY HOUSE I/DD INDIVIDUALS IS PERSONAL



Executive leaders of HOPE North Carolina, from left: Orah Raia, Laura Wells and Ginny Dropkin.

Three mothers came together in July 2018 with a common concern: Where would their adult sons, each of whom is in the autism spectrum, live when the parent is no longer there to assist them?

It's the fear that every parent of a child with [intellectual and development disabilities](#) (I/DD) disorder agonizes over.

Ginny Dropkin, Dotty Foley and Orah Raia were not your common worriers, they were conviction warriors, and they spent the next year researching what was being done to address

the issue in other parts of the country. “It’s become a nationwide movement for parents who realize the government isn’t going to be doing this for us,” said Dropkin, who serves as secretary of the nonprofit she, Foley and Raia co-founded.

Housing Options for People with Exceptionalities, [HOPE North Carolina](#), has garnered more than \$975,000 in grant funding in 2021 and 2022, attracted local business professionals and leaders in state agencies to its boards, and grown its roster of community supporters to a database of more than 1,700.

The HOPE model envisions a fully integrated and intergenerational community for I/DD adults, elderly individuals and families with low- to moderate-incomes. The goal is to build a pilot community in the Triangle that can become a prototype for HOPE communities around the state.

Laura Wells serves as HOPE’s executive director and said collaboration with other nonprofit leaders is key. “We operate from the equity and social justice lens of trying to have people with I/DD at the table where housing decisions are being made,” Wells said.

And one way they’re doing that is through an initiative branded the Collective Impact Project, led by a 50-person stakeholder action team that meets quarterly and includes organizations from across the Triangle.

“We have folks on that team that are running some of the largest disability nonprofit organizations in the area, like the Arc and the Autism Society, and we have nonprofit developers who are working on affordable housing in the Triangle, state employees from DHHS, folks in transportation from NCSU and DOT, and – as part of that equity lens – there are adults with I/DD and older adults who can express why they want inclusive housing.”

Dropkin’s dream is that the HOPE community will provide a viable alternative for her son, who’s 42, and her co-founders’ sons, both in their 30s. “We want to build an inclusive community in the Triangle area where people like our sons could live in a place where neighbors are caring for each other.”

The “secret sauce” of the HOPE community is the “belonging or engagement piece,” it’s not just renting housing to people.

Wells explains: “We’re going to have staff on site that are offering programs and checking in on people, making sure people are engaged in that community where they live.”

On July 1, HOPE entered year two of a \$150,000 annual grant from UNC Cares that is slated to run through 2026, providing the organization a healthy cushion from which to build. Additionally, they have recruited a development partner, the Preservation of Affordable Housing (POAH) out of Boston, which [owns and operates 12,700 affordable rental units](#) across 11 states and D.C.

“POAH will work to make whatever community we build affordable for a lifetime, that it’s sustainable affordability for the residents,” Wells said. “That means we have to use low-income housing tax credits, which makes finding the perfect piece of property a challenge.”

The project with HOPE will be POAH’s first in North Carolina and its focal point for new construction in the state, but Jon Springfield, POAH’s senior project manager, believes there is considerable need throughout the region for the work POAH does. The organization is known for buying existing affordable housing and preserving it so residents aren’t displaced. Their expectation is for additional projects in the region, potentially in rural as well as urban markets.

Springfield, who grew up in Raleigh and has relocated from Boston to Asheville as POAH expands into this state, is excited by HOPE’s intention to create an active, integrated community, and by the inclusion of I/DD individuals. “When we’ve built affordable elderly housing, it’s age-restricted and separated,” he said. That tends to foster social isolation, something the HOPE community aims to mitigate. “We’re hoping the community spaces are the first thing you see when you come to the HOPE community. They will be a main feature, offering a recreation space and place to bring in different programming and service providers,” Springfield said.

The goal is for 25 percent of the residents to be adults with I/DD, 25 percent older adults, and 50 percent low- to moderate-income families. Dropkin said the co-founders are intent on choosing a site in Wake, Durham or Orange county, with access to transportation options and, ideally, grocery stores and essential services within walkable distance. Finding the right urban site on the scale they are envisioning is a challenge.

“It has to be suitable for 40 to 60 units so it’s a big piece of land, a minimum of two acres, possibly six to seven acres,” said Springfield, who suggests that partnering with local

governments, other nonprofits, churches or any organization that has access to land and is interested in supporting affordable housing may be a logical path forward.

Alliance Health, the managed care organization (MCO) for public behavioral health that serves Cumberland, Durham, Johnston, Mecklenburg, Orange and Wake counties, is one of HOPE's key partners.

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"We had been looking for opportunities to partner in the I/DD community with some of the housing interventions we'd done on the mental health or substance abuse side," said Ann Oshel, senior vice president of community health and well-being at Alliance. "One of the things that has been missing is the model that HOPE has brought to the conversation: an inclusive

community for people with I/DD who need a different level of support and a different type of support than people with other disabilities.”

In particular, Oshel appreciates the dignity and independence that the HOPE model affords the I/DD community. “It not only brings the right levels of support for people to learn independent living skills and be successful, it also addresses the very real aspect of aging parents who don’t want their adult children to be institutionalized, who want them to have employment opportunities to be integrated into their communities like non-disabled people.”

The HOPE community aims to fill the gap between living fully on their own and an assisted living group home. “The only staff will be a community facilitator, one or more people, who create the community engagement part – plan activities, find commonalities among residents, help residents connect to the right services so they can continue flourishing,” Dropkin said.

The timeline for acquiring property and constructing from the ground up likely puts completion of the pilot community around 2027. As an interim plan, Wells said, “We’re looking at integrating our model of social connection and engagement into existing housing, something we could start this fall in places where I/DD people already live, and also integrating into a development that’s approved to be constructed, something that could happen by 2024-25.”

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HOPE North Carolina

Executive director: Laura Wells

Co-founders: Ginny Dropkin, Dotty Foley, Orah Raia

Emails: lauraw@hopenorthcarolina.org and ginny@hopenorthcarolina.org

Founded: 2018

Operating budget 2023-24: \$221,000

Employees: 1 full-time, 1 part-time

Board of directors: 10 members

Advisory board: 5 members

Volunteers: 10-20

Funding: \$975,000+

- \$150,000 grant, recurring annually 2022 – 2026, from UNC Cares funded by Money Follows the Person (NC Medicaid)
- \$50,000 annual fundraising campaign for past 2 years
- \$50,000 – 2022, from The Oak Foundation
- \$48,000 – 2021, from Cardinal Healthcare
- \$24,000 – 2022 from Sandra Hoskins Legacy Foundation
- \$5,000 – 2022 from Strowd Roses
- \$1,500 – 2021 from Wake County Community Foundation
- \$1,000 – 2022 from Wake County Community Foundation

About this project: The Earth + Equity project [explores the growing awareness, actions and accountability of businesses and leaders](#) who face opportunities and challenges relating to environmental, social and governance (ESG) issues. The [52-week project](#) will highlight what

selected companies and Triangle executives are doing to address climate change, diversity, equity, inclusion, and ways to maneuver the new world of corporate responsibilities.