



Owner: Albany Damien Center | Location: Albany, NY | Completion Date: 2017
Programs Achieved: Energy Star, LEED for Homes, NYSERDA Low Rise

The Albany Damien Center supports some of New York's most vulnerable residents—chronically homeless people and families living with or affected by HIV/AIDS. The nonprofit organization provides its members with free housing, medical care, and peer-led health and wellness education services. It also works to decrease rates of new HIV infections in New York state.

From the Ashes Rise New Possibilities

In 2013, the original Albany Damien Center Residences were lost to a devastating fire—limiting the agency's services for members for several years. Thanks to multiple grants from New York State, including \$4.3 million from its Homeless Housing and Assistance Program, and from generous community donations, the Damien Center secured enough funding to pursue a gold LEED® rating with its \$5.6 million housing project.

The Damien Center found its new housing in 2016: a \$300,000 historic Madison Avenue property in the Pine Hills neighborhood of urban Albany. The property sat vacant for over 10 years, but after 14 months of construction, the new addition adjoined the original building to become a 26,000-square foot LEED® for Homes v4 certified Gold residence. It shelters 22 people living with HIV/AIDS in 20 permanent supportive apartments—including 18 studio and two one-bedroom apartments. The Residences also complement the

neighborhood and existing historical elements—a major priority of the project.

For members, the Albany Damien Center Residences are life-changing. One member, who prefers to remain anonymous, says, "The Albany Damien Center has been a dream. I was struggling with homelessness for a while and never found an agency that could help me. Once I came to the Damien Center, I felt like [I was at] home. Living here has made it easier to get food, my medication, and the support I need to better my health. I'm eternally grateful for this place."

Damien Center staff members see the rebirth of the Residences as a triumph for the people they serve and for the entire community.



“This building indicates a new chapter for the agency,” says Jonathan Richardson, Director of Development for the Damien Center. “We want to make sure our organization is able to serve people struggling with homelessness and HIV for a long time. With that in mind, being sustainable and energy-efficient was an important part of ensuring a sustainable future. The Pine Hills neighborhood in Albany, New York, really cares about energy efficiency and renewable energy. We also wanted to integrate with its community culture.”

Achieving Rigorous LEED® V4 Gold Certification After a Delayed Start

The Damien Center Residences project came with challenges. For one, the grants received required that the addition to the new Residences be LEED®-certified, but not the existing structure, so more intensive engineering took place.

“The energy efficiency grant came in later than usual, right as the design phase was coming to a close. That means we had to quickly step in to get the additional green building requirements met. Besides that, the most difficult aspect of this project was making sure that the general contractor and subcontractors understood the program requirements. We consulted to teach them their roles in incorporating LEED® v4 elements into the building during construction.”

*- Chris Straille, Director of Operations,
at Sustainable Comfort, Inc.*

The LEED® for Homes v4 Gold certification is already complex under normal conditions. It is designed to up the ante for certifications with a more flexible, performance-based approach that calls for measurable results throughout a building’s life cycle. Sustainable Comfort Incorporated (SCI) is currently one of only a few providers in the country actively certifying projects in v4.

When the addition to the Albany Damien Center Residences was certified in January 2018, it was the 11th LEED® for Homes v4 certified Gold multifamily project in the country. At the time, there were only 255 v4 certified multifamily apartments, and SCI was responsible for two of those projects—including the Albany Damien Center Residences, totaling 76 units. As of Oct 22, 2018, there are 1,075 LEED® v4 homes and apartments in the country, and SCI has certified about 20 percent of the total projects nationwide.

Despite delays and the stringent guidelines, the SCI team was able to expedite the Albany Damien Center Residences project to finish it on time and with accolades.



LEED® providers receive grades from the U.S. Green Building Council (USGBC) each year. One metric focuses on how quickly projects get submitted for certification after the final site visit. In 2017, SCI reported the fastest rate in the country—19 days on average—making it the only provider in the U.S. to come in below the target 30 days set by the USGBC.

A Team Effort

Mercer Construction and Sanders Architects worked closely with SCI to make this state-of-the-art facility a reality. SCI served as the green building consultant for the project, providing guidance and support to help ensure that the Damien Center achieved its LEED® for Homes v4 Gold goal for the addition to the Residences.

SCI Vice President James Moriarty says, “LEED® for Homes v4 is implemented by a LEED® Green Rater, who oversees and verifies each home and apartment complex that uses the LEED® rating system. Unlike [with] other versions of LEED®, as the Green Rater [for v4] we are able to provide a single point of communication for the project team. We work to make LEED® for Homes v4 easy to understand.

Together, the teams restored the original historic elements of the property and constructed a new wing based on LEED® guidelines—one of the first properties of its kind to adhere to strict v4 requirements.

“We’ve done several projects with Sustainable Comfort. They meet with our team during the planning stages to make sure we have the right types of insulation systems, heating systems, and other important elements incorporated in

the building,” says Owen Neitzel, the architect responsible for designing the sustainable spaces of the Albany Damien Center Residences. “I also particularly like that when all the carpenters and other craftsmen come together at the beginning of the project, Sustainable Comfort will come out and do a presentation on how their work should be done so that the building will pass air infiltration tests and all the systems will be up to par. Doing things right from the beginning means it’s easy to get the building certified quickly when the project is complete.”

SCI also streamlined the development process—making an extremely complex project simpler for everyone involved.

“The LEED® certification process was easy for us. The service allowed us to look at every construction process we used along the way to make sure everything was on track to be LEED® Gold. For example, we had to take out all the tubs due to improper insulation. It was well worth the time and investment.”

*Jonathan Richardson,
Director of Development for the Damien Center.*

Building for Sustainability and Longevity With LEED® for Homes V4 Gold

As of 2018, the LEED® rating system is one of the most sought-after certifications for buildings, homes, and communities when it comes to optimal environmental and human health impact. The brand-new Albany Damien Center Residences comply with many LEED® standards, including the following requirements:

- High-performing mechanical system with high-efficiency, ductless mini-split heat pumps, serving each unit and high-efficiency furnaces in the common areas with heating and cooling
- Located in the heart of Albany on a previously developed site with easy resident access to transportation and services
- Energy-efficient recovery ventilation systems, using Zehnder central ERV systems with 84% recovery in each unit, purifying indoor and outdoor air
- LED lighting and Energy Star-qualified appliances
- Low-flow water fixtures
- High levels of insulation and air tightness, including ZIP System R sheathing to combine continuous insulation with exterior wall sheathing, as well as high levels of insulation in the walls and roof
- Efficient framing, minimizing the amount of wood needed for the structure
- Radon-resistant materials used in construction

What LEED® V4 Certification Means for the Damien Center Residents and Greater Albany

LEED® certification was a major goal for the Damien Center, because sustainable construction reserves financial resources for members and protects the delicate health of residents. Building to these high green standards also supports the environment, aligns with the sustainability goals of the community, and sets a precedent for more construction to go above and beyond with LEED® v4 certification.



Tracie Hall, director of USGBC New York Upstate, explains, “Being good stewards of charitable contributions is of paramount importance. LEED® provides a measurable means of reducing operating costs, thereby allowing more donation dollars to be directed toward actual mission-driven work. Equally, if not more important, is the creation of a more comfortable and productive environment for your employees, and, in the case of Albany Damien Center Residences, for your residents. LEED® provides the tools to ensure a healthy indoor environment with clean air, access to daylight, and attention to detail to enhance the human experience within the built environment.”

The Residences achieved an average Home Energy Rating System (HERS) Index score of 44 for its 20 apartment units, which demonstrates that the project uses far less energy than comparable construction. The Albany Damien Center Residences also achieved an Energy Star® Homes Certification through the EPA and incentives through the NYSERDA Low Rise New Construction Program, totaling \$51,000.

In addition, the Damien Center now saves its community \$25,000 to \$50,000 per person per year in emergency services and Medicaid use by keeping members healthier and off the streets. For everyone involved, the benefits are clear.

“I think that any time you give someone a nice, comfortable, safe place to live, it allows them to better themselves and lead a healthier life. The residents who do, they understand that we designed a very sustainable building. It means a lot to them.”

— Owen Neitzel, Architect

Winning Industry Awards and Stealing the Hearts of the Community

Construction for the Albany Damien Center Residences wrapped up in 2017, and residents have called the resource center home for over one year. The building was also given the Community Champion Award by USGBC New York Upstate in 2018. This award recognizes projects that address the needs of an underserved community and meet USGBC’s vision of healthy and sustainable buildings.

Sustainable Comfort, Mercer Construction, and Sanders Architects are equally excited about their contributions to the success of the finished project and their role in its LEED® certification.

“Working on projects which are independently awarded and recognized as being leaders in the industry is always very rewarding for us,” says Moriarty. “The intention of many of the energy efficiency and green building programs such as LEED® for Homes is to demonstrate to the community the efforts taken to provide healthy, safe, and energy-efficient homes. This is especially the case with the Albany Damien Center with their additional mission to serve the members in their city.”

Albany Damien Center leaders feel honored for the recognition as well. Richardson says, “We are extremely proud. Our main priority was serving our people. Over 80% of the people we served indicated they were homeless at a point after their HIV diagnosis. It was crucial for us to build a facility to address the need for safe and affordable housing for people who struggle with homelessness who are HIV positive and at risk for contracting HIV. If a nonprofit wants to think about long-term impact, then striving for sustainable spaces is important. There are some upfront costs, but the long-term benefits will be well worth it.”

