



Anishinabe Wakiagun: Designing for Tenants

Supportive housing is often designed by architects who have little familiarity with the day-to-day lives and needs of formerly homeless tenants. By working closely with architects during the design of a new building, supportive housing tenants and owners can make valuable suggestions that improve the quality of life of future tenants.

Anishinabe Wakiagun was completed in 1996 in Minneapolis, Minnesota to serve homeless chronic inebriates, many of whom are Native American. The design concepts used in this building specifically for this population not only illustrate the results of a collaborative design process, but also may be useful in supportive housing generally.

For more information on Anishinabe Wakiagun, visit our [photo tour](#) and [profile](#). The Toolkit also includes suggested [supportive housing design standards](#).

The foremost consideration in construction Anishinabe Wakiagun was to create a very durable, low maintenance Prairie-style facility scaled to homelike proportions and yet large enough to house 40 residents. The design avoids any appearances of “boarding school” that had traumatized so many residents in their youth and yet is attractive and comfortable. Many residents need crutches and wheelchairs, so accessibility was paramount, including site access for frequent emergency vehicles. Most residents are heavy smokers, so care was also made to ensure as much fireproof construction as possible.

Sobriety is not a condition of tenancy at Anishinabe Wakiagun, and many of the tenants are regular drinkers. To address this, hallways are deliberately narrower than usual to enable residents who are staggering to use walls for support in getting to their rooms. Glass blocks bring daylight into the hall from the rooms and at night allow visitors and staff to see if lights are on or off without having to knock on a tenant’s door. Three stairways and an elevator large enough for a medical gurney ensure that support staff can get to any of the residential and day rooms quickly in emergencies. Security cameras are strategically placed both inside and out to provide staff with a panoramic view of the whole site; a video recorder is connected to the system in case incidents or accidents need to be investigated. Each room has a window projection to provide a wide view of the outdoors, which is meaningful for people who spent many years outside on the streets. With this design, residents have never expressed frustration of being “cooped up” in their rooms.

Directly in front of the building’s entrance is what is known as the “Memorial Tree.” This blessing tree represents the 55 homeless, late-stage chronic alcoholic Native Americans who died or were killed in the five years before Anishinabe Wakiagun was built. Friends and relatives gathered on the site on Indigenous People’s Day in 1994 to honor and remember those who have “walked on.” The Memorial Tree was wrapped in tobacco ties, cedar, sage, an eagle feather, and note cards with the names of loved ones written on them.

The building was placed on the site specifically to preserve the Memorial Tree. A stipulation was made during construction of Anishinabe Wakiagun that every effort must be made to protect the tree even though it is only a few feet from the building's entrance. The construction foreman said he had recurring nightmares that something would happen to harm the tree, but it survived. Recently an arborist who had been consulted about the tree originally said that the tree is even healthier now than it was before any construction took place. The Memorial Tree is now part of the logo of Anishinabe Wakiagun.