

Meet Abang Ojullu

Abang Ojullu remembers all too vividly the day she put her eldest daughter on a small ambulance jet bound for Sioux Falls. The child's asthma attack was too severe for doctors in rural Worthington, Minnesota to treat.

"They were telling me she could die," Abang says, recalling the harrowing trip four years ago. "They kept telling me you only have a few hours."

In daughter Ananaya's short life, she'd experienced a long litany of maladies. Some winters, the girl's asthma was compounded by pneumonia. Frequent hospitalizations and doctor visits meant missed school days. For two years, Abang made the hour-long drive to Sioux Falls once a month so Ananaya could see a specialist.

But last winter, six months after moving into the newly-renovated **Viking Terrace Apartments**, Ananaya did not get sick once, her mother says. Neither did any of her five other children, though in the past each had bouts of asthma that often required nebulizer treatments.

Today, the family is enjoying life in their new apartment and 14-year-old Ananaya plays basketball, volleyball and soccer without any shortness of breath.

"Now she's perfect," brags Abang. "It's amazing."

Abang and her six children are living proof that one's environment has a direct impact on health. Unlike previous residences, their three-bedroom unit in southwest Minnesota includes air conditioning, exhaust fans in the kitchen and bathrooms and no mold anywhere.

Abang, 34, says her children's health has improved since they moved in a year ago, and a checkup by the local nurse confirms the mother's theory. Ananaya and her sister Rebecca recently scored noticeably better than before on a standard test used to measure lung capacity.

Originally built in 1978, the 60-unit apartment complex has a modern laundry so Abang can follow the doctor's advice to wash blankets and clothes often. The apartment complex also added a playground with benches for the adults. Having that pleasant safe environment—as opposed to the busy street where they used to live—means the Ojullu kids are getting a lot more exercise and fresh air.

"Parents take turns sitting out there watching the children," she says.

The physical improvements, along with a health education campaign, are part of a joint project aimed at demonstrating the health benefits of green building principles. Participants include the **National Center for Healthy Housing**, the **Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Minnesota Foundation**, **Minnesota Green Communities**, the **Southwest Minnesota Housing Partnership** and local and state governments.

Research has shown that low-income families are particularly vulnerable to environmental hazards in their homes, such as lead paint, mold, crowding and rodents and other pests, as well as problems such as water leaks, poor ventilation and dirty carpets that can lead to an increase in mold, mites and other allergens associated with poor health. More than 20 million Americans have asthma and about 40 percent of diagnosed asthma among children is believed to be a result of residential conditions.

"It doesn't make sense to have people get sick or injured because of their housing," says Dave Jacobs, director of research at the National Center for Healthy Housing. "These sorts of approaches can save significant dollars in the medical sector."

For Abang Ojullu, who grew up in Ethiopia, healthy housing conditions make for healthier children.

"This has made me so excited," she says. "I am so happy to see that my kids are not sick the way they used to be."

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) formed the Commission to Build a Healthier America to investigate why Americans aren't as healthy as they could be and to look outside the health care system for ways to improve health for all. Learn more about the health initiative at www.commissiononhealth.org.



Photo courtesy of Blue Cross and Blue Shield Foundation of Minnesota