



The Sun Times News

“I have never seen anything like St Louis Center”

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Five miles west of Chelsea on Old US12 lies a campus that has radically changed lives for 62 years. You have probably heard of St. Louis Center but may not know much about the residential campus on 180 acres in scenic Sylvan Township.

St. Louis Center provides residential foster care for persons with intellectual and developmental disabilities (I/DD) ages 18 and up. Some residents have lived at SLC for as long as 40 years, while others may have lived there for only a few months. For however long a resident is at SLC, the mission is to enrich and enable them as is possible.



Last November, the youth group at Faith Baptist Church in Chelsea invited SLC residents for a round of disc golf on the church's campus.

“What we have are residents with special needs integrating with the surrounding community, fulfilling both communities' potential,” says Wendy Zielen, Development & Communications Director for SLC. “What people learn from folks like those who live at St Louis Center is very special.”

SLC was built in 1960 as the St. Louis School Educational Program for Exceptional Boys. The school is an outreach of the Servants of Charity based in Italy. Servants of Charity is the vision of St. Louis Guanella, who reached out to the poor, disabled, and disenfranchised of the world in the early 1900s by building missionary homes.



Enrichment and educational programs occur daily on and off campus for residents.

“St Louis Center began as a new boarding school for 60 boys with I/DD,” explains Zielen.

“With Michigan's Mandatory Special Education Act of 1971, the boys at St. Louis Center began integrating with the school district, but many still needed a place to call home when they became adults. The Center began providing residential care and life skills training for residents older than 18. In 2002, St. Louis Center also opened a new wing to accept women.”

In talking to the staff, you quickly learn that their commitment goes much deeper than a sense of public service for the greater good, although that would be wonderful enough in itself. For many, if not all, of the SLC staff, their work is driven by a profound conviction that goes well beyond the norm of corporate career aspirations.



(top left) The latest housing innovation at SLC is cottages that provide independent living. (top right) St. Joseph Hall is for adult men with intellectual and developmental disabilities over 18. (bottom left) K of C Hall was designed for residents who are most compromised in their safety and self-care skills. (bottom right) In 2002, the care facility run by the Daughters of St. Mary of Providence Sisters in Northville, MI,

closed. The Our Lady of Province wing houses in Fr. Guanella Hall was the first living quarters for women when they were included in 2002. “First and foremost, for us, it is not a job. It is a mission,” says St Louis Center CEO Father Enzo Addari. “We are a faith-based organization, and one of our philosophies is that every person has been made in the image and likeness of God.”

SLC seeks to increase the independent living skills of its able residents. Residents are coached in daily routines of cleanliness and organization of their room, self-care through physical hygiene, and basic cooking skills. Residents preparing for independent living are enrolled in Independence College, an 8-week program that teaches laundry, budgeting, banking, and other life skills.



With a staff-to-patient ratio of almost two to one, the details of each resident’s needs are well-monitored.

Summer Reed, SLC’s Social Services Admissions Coordinator, is a relative newcomer to the organization, being a part of the team for less than a year. What attracted her to apply for the position is how SLC stands out in the care and services provided for residents.

“I’ve worked in the health care field for quite a few years, but I have never seen anything like St Louis Center,” says Reed. “I think the social work department is what makes it a lot different to help them live the best life possible, and you see it happening every day.”

“Having a social work department is unusual for facilities of our size,” adds Zielen. “Our mission that differentiates us is to really take these folks to their potential, and our social workers are the ones that make that happen. They are the ones who navigate all of the bureaucracy that has to happen to accomplish that.”

Programs are individualized to meet the specific needs of each residence. For example, of SLC’s 55 residents, 51 of them have special dietary needs. Others require around-the-clock assistance and monitoring. SLC provides structured supervision 24/7/365 with a team of 100 staff. Living quarters vary with each resident’s level of independence – from around-the-clock supervision to independent living. Campus amenities include a chapel, gymnasium, playground and park, sports fields, walking trails, life enrichment area, and residential gardens.

“We, as a religious community, the very first and foremost thing is to dedicate ourselves to serve, especially people with disabilities who many times are left at the margin,” says Addari. “For us, that is critical because they are also fully human beings. They have their contributions to society. Essentially, our mission is to give them dignity in who they are as human beings.”

You can learn more about St. Louis Center at <https://stlouiscenter.org/>