MARIPOSA, a mixed-income redevelopment project, is transforming a once-distressed public housing complex into a neighborhood that prioritizes affordability, active transportation, cultural diversity, and healthy living.

Developed by the Denver Housing Authority (DHA), Mariposa is planned to include 800 affordable and market-rate residential units at completion; 457 units had been built as of early 2017. Health-focused amenities include community gardens, nutrition and cooking classes, and an active staircase.
Development Context

The Mariposa site was once the South Lincoln Park Homes public housing complex. In 2009, DHA began the process of redeveloping the half-century-old complex—which was experiencing concentrated poverty and above-average levels of crime—into a new development focused on community health.

During planning, the Mariposa Healthy Living Initiative, led by DHA and multidisciplinary design firm Mithun, was created to comprehensively address community health throughout redevelopment.

Through the initiative, community engagement efforts revealed that existing residents wanted to live in a safe, walkable, mixed-use community with convenient access to healthy food and community services. Lynne Picard, DHA director of workforce development and community initiatives, says these resident priorities guided redevelopment. “It takes input from all levels of the community to figure out what it takes to create a healthy community—not just physical health, but economic health, transportation health,” she says. “You need all of them to create a truly healthy community.”

Health-Focused Features

Features to promote physical, mental, and community health at Mariposa include the following:

- **Active transportation.** A bike-sharing station connects residents to destinations throughout Denver via the B-Cycle system. Mariposa is within walking distance of the Tenth and Osage light-rail station, providing residents without cars with a healthy and affordable way to get around.

- **A health care shuttle bus.** Residents have access to free transportation to the Denver Health Medical Plaza.

- **Creative placemaking.** Murals and public art were commissioned in plazas and on buildings to support neighborhood safety and reflect cultural diversity in the public realm.

Development Lessons

As part of the Mariposa Healthy Living Initiative, DHA performs yearly surveys of Mariposa residents to assess changes in health indicators. These surveys have already shown positive results. By 2012, after the first phases of redevelopment, 38 percent of residents said their health had improved, and smoking rates had dropped 6 percent. The percentage of residents with access to open space and nature within a half mile (0.8 km) of their homes increased from 26 to 32 percent and the crime rate per 1,000 people decreased from 248 to 157.

Spurred by the redevelopment, Mariposa is now surrounded by a number of businesses and neighborhood institutions, including a 24-hour grocery store, a full-service pharmacy, and eight community and conventional banks.

Although waiting lists for housing at Mariposa are significant, 45 percent of the South Lincoln Park Homes residents have returned, which compares favorably with the national rate of 10 percent for similar public housing redevelopment projects.

Much of Mariposa’s success has relied on strong partnerships, including with the Colorado Health Foundation. “Through dedicated community engagement and tailoring design elements with educational programming to reflect community needs, Mariposa has made healthy living a norm,” says Khanh Nguyen, portfolio director at the Colorado Health Foundation. “Given their thoughtful and successful approach, they have become a leader in healthy and creative design. We are proud to have partnered with them early in the process and delighted to see that community thrive.”