BETHESDA – NIAGARA FAMILY CENTRE
Designing for Autism Spectrum Disorder sensitivities
Since 1937, Bethesda Residential Holdings Inc. (Bethesda) has provided a wide range of support and services to individuals with special needs in the Niagara, Hamilton, Brant, Haldimand and Norfolk regions of Ontario. As the number of children diagnosed with an Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and other developmental disabilities in the Niagara region increases, Bethesda’s service mandates continue to grow. Bethesda has adopted seven new children’s programs for families seeking a diagnosis and support for their special needs child. Bethesda currently serves approximately 1000 children and youth with ASD, with hundreds more on a waiting list. To better address this burgeoning need, Bethesda launched its plan in 2013 to construct a new Family Centre at 3310 Schmon Parkway.

Autism’s special design requirements

Many autistic children are highly sensitive to the sight, sound and feel of their environment. Therefore, autism-friendly spaces need to pay close attention to texture, uniformity, acoustics, and lighting conditions. Specifically, for ASD patients:

- Excess noise can be at best distracting and at worst, sensory overload. Therefore, window and door solutions need to have sound-dampening capabilities.
- Care should be taken to reduce any sounds, rattles, and related noises. This eliminates blinds, curtains and exterior shades as privacy solutions.
- Insulation from other noises in the environment (traffic, for example) is important for similar reasons.
- Indirect lighting should be used, and lighting needs to be adjustable to ensure protection from over-bright lights and glare – both of which can be distressing to ASD patients.
- Uniformity of textures and design can help create a soothingly consistent environment.

The solution – optimal control of privacy, sound and light

To ensure an optimally ASD-sensitive privacy solution, architects selected Unicel’s Vision Control® integrated louvers. Vision Control® is a patented, hermetically sealed glass unit combining louvers within glass that can be customized to virtually any shape for interior or exterior glazing applications. Its advanced louvered glazing technology eliminates strings, ensures alignment, requires no maintenance and provides the ideal privacy solution for ASD patient spaces.
Benefits

With Vision Control®, the primary benefits for Bethesda patients include:

- Total privacy - Completely adjustable privacy and visibility levels for Bethesda personnel and ASD patients and families.
- Tranquility - Sound wave barriers and 2" airspace thickness between glass panes significantly reduce unwanted noise and distractions.
- Control of light – The louvers can be angled to mitigate or eliminate both excessive or harsh light and glare.
- Uniformity - Perfectly aligned louvers support ASD-sensitive design approaches.

Today

The 27,000-square-foot facility opened in June 2016, welcoming children diagnosed with an autism spectrum disorder, along with their families, into the new two-storey building on Schmon Parkway. In addition to the playground and gymnasium, the facility also includes classrooms suitable for both one-on-one and group programs, space for autism consultation and behavioural support, respite care, office space for workers, as well as a meeting facility on the second floor that will host speakers and workshops for family members. Children of ages two to 18 with ASD and other special needs, along with their families, will now be more effectively supported and served by the new Bethesda Niagara Family Centre.

Participants:
Owner: Bethesda Residential Holdings Inc.
Architects: Quartek Group Inc.
General Contractor: Brouwer Construction
Glazier: CANDO Aluminum
Integrated Louvers Manufacturer: Unicel Architectural