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A haven for homeless veterans

Pittsfield community a first in the nation



Tom Clark, a Marine veteran of the Vietnam War, will be moving into a new complex in Pittsfield designed for homeless veterans. The housing (above) was begun last year with federal and state funds. (Matthew Cavanaugh for The Boston Globe)

By [David Abel](#)

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PITTSFIELD — Like too many veterans of the Vietnam War, Tom Clark has been homeless for years. Now he's making a list of all the domestic items he will soon need — a loveseat, vacuum cleaner, an iron — and considering things he never imagined would be a concern, such as how to match his bedding with curtains.

“This is unbelievable that this is possible,” said Clark, 58, a former Marine corporal, as he shared his list of household items with fellow veterans from nearby shelters who will join him this month in a new, daintily manicured complex in Pittsfield.

It is the nation's first community of its kind for homeless veterans and part of a new approach to fighting homelessness: Instead of moving those without homes into overcrowded emergency shelters or transitional places far from services, the \$6.1 million project that looks like a high-end condo complex provides them with attractive one-bedroom and studio apartments for as long as they want to stay.

The new community, which was built beside a shelter for veterans and includes an array of mental health and addiction services, allows the veterans to buy in with a \$2,500 deposit and, depending on the size of the apartment, make regular payments of either \$640 or \$740 from their disability checks or other income to an association that they run.

Local banks are helping some of the veterans cover their deposits, and others will be allowed to pay them over time. They will also build equity, and the units will be theirs as long as they make their payments.

“There’s nowhere else like this in the country,” said Peter Dougherty, director of homeless veterans’ programs for the US Department of Veterans Affairs, who said that last year, there were an estimated 107,000 homeless veterans, down from about 250,000 a decade ago.

“It offers a unique opportunity to take veterans that have been homeless and turn them into homeowners,” he said. “It really is an opportunity that has not happened in other places yet. We’re really interested in seeing how well it works.”

The project was the idea of the directors of Soldier On, a local nonprofit provider of services for homeless veterans that houses about 500 veterans a year at shelters and transitional housing in Pittsfield and Leeds. The group broke ground last year on the project after receiving money from a congressional earmark and state grants.

Jack Downing, president of Soldier On, said he was inspired by the idea that there is a simple solution to homelessness: housing. But he noted that the challenge in previous efforts to house the homeless has not just been finding housing but keeping the homeless in their homes.

“I realized that we were sending people to facilities where they were going to be isolated and lonely, which is the gateway to mental illness,” said Downing, whose group plans an additional 120 units for homeless veterans at the former State Police Training Academy in Agawam and a similar number of homes on the Veterans Affairs campus in Northampton. “When I saw what else was out there, I thought that we had to come up with something different.”

Unlike other programs, he said, their project will give the homeless a sense of ownership and a feeling of permanence. They will be free to decorate their new homes as they like and do what they choose inside. But when they experience hard times or have other problems, they will be able to turn to a community of like-minded veterans who will be their neighbors.

They will also be able get help when needed from social workers and therapists at the adjacent shelter, which is separated from the new development by a small parking lot.

“It’s taken a lot to get this launched, but this is where homelessness ends,” Downing said. “We expect this is where these guys will spend the rest of their lives. We’re going to build a memorial wall here, so people know who lived and died here.”

Unlike the shelters and other housing run by Soldier On, which sometimes removes people if they are caught drinking or using drugs, act violently, or violate other policies, he said there will be few rules for the veterans moving into the new housing, aside from obeying the law.

“We will treat them like adults,” Downing said.

The project is named the Gordon H. Mansfield Veterans Community, after the former deputy secretary of the US Department of Veterans Affairs Department. Mansfield served from 2005 to 2008 and helped build support for the project.

“This is completely unique and hopefully leads us in a different direction,” Mansfield said in a phone interview, noting that the high expenses would make it a difficult program to replicate on a large scale. “I really believe that this is the kind of solution we need.”

The multicolored apartments each have large windows and closets, solar panels on the roofs, modern kitchens, tiled floors, and handicap-accessible showers.

Most of them look onto a grassy courtyard with newly planted trees, benches, and other amenities, including several Vermont Castings grills and a horseshoe pit. There will also be a laundry room and gym for residents.

The scope of the project has made the veterans, who were chosen from a pool of residents at Soldier On’s other facilities, excited and nervous.

Lenny Costa, 58, a former Army corporal who spent years fighting a heroin addiction, said he hasn’t been able to sleep recently, because he was so excited about his new place.

“It did scare me for a while, but I’m going to have a big safety net all around,” said Costa, who said he can hardly wait to take up cooking. “The way things are I can’t afford not to live here. All I can say is that we’re really fortunate.”

Jay Baran, 47, who served as a fireman in the Coast Guard, said he feels like Dorothy in “The Wizard of Oz.”

“I keep thinking, ‘There’s no place like home. There’s no place like home,’ ” he said. “This is as much of a win-win opportunity as I could have imagined. I’d be crazy not to take this.”

As for Tom Clark, his list includes a colander and blender, a cutlery set, baking pans, end tables, and the stuff that turns water blue in the toilet. It continues to grow as other vets give him ideas.

“I see this as a new beginning,” he said. “Really, it’s the beginning of a new life.”

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