



## **“HOUSING FOR HEROES”**

### **A Comprehensive Plan to Provide Housing Opportunities for Veterans in Danbury**

#### The Need

Yearly point in time counts and Danbury’s Homeless Management Information System have documented a need for providing services to veterans experiencing homelessness, including veterans who are classified as chronically homeless. Representatives from the VA Connecticut Healthcare System have indicated that the incidence of homelessness among veterans could actually be higher than documented in our local data. Further, a significant number of veterans have not been successfully reached through prior outreach efforts. We believe based on VA CHALENG data estimates that there are 3,000 to 5,000 homeless veterans in Connecticut. Existing local outreach efforts and data collection systems have been able to identify approximately forty homeless veterans in Danbury, but the actual number is projected to be higher.

Representatives from VA Connecticut Healthcare System have also identified the need for housing related services in the western Connecticut region. It is expected that the need for housing with supportive services will increase as veterans returning from difficult combat and support duties may require an increase in assistance to deal with physical, emotional and mental health issues related to their experiences.

The housing needs of veterans are not limited to those who are homeless. A wide range of housing is needed to meet the diverse needs of veterans returning to live in our community. Significant numbers of veterans need housing while they pursue an education at Western Connecticut State University or Naugatuck Valley Community College in Danbury. Other veterans require housing as they seek job training to transition from the service to a new career. Veterans seeking to start a family and a new life need affordable rental housing and starter homes. The needs of single-parent households, both male- and female- headed require attention. Mention should also be made of the needs of guard and reserve troops who have been called to serve extended stints of active duty during the course of our recent conflicts.

The needs demonstrate that what is needed is a comprehensive approach to address the diverse housing needs of veterans. To welcome veterans back into our community requires that we act to provide a continuum of housing options from emergency housing for homeless veterans to homeownership for veteran-headed families.

## Background

The Mayor’s Taskforce to End Homelessness chaired by Judge Dianne Yamin produced the “Ten-Year Plan to End Homelessness” that was approved by the Common Council of the City of Danbury in March of 2006. The Ten-Year Plan included the following recommendations with respect to housing for veterans:

- Year One: Veteran’s organizations are provided information about the need for permanent and transitional living opportunities for homeless veterans and asked to collaborate in establishing and developing such resources.
- Year Two: Complete organizational work and applications for funding for veteran’s housing opportunities.
- Year Three: Develop transitional housing for veterans with identified funding streams using models best practices that have been established.

The Danbury Housing Partnership was reorganized and given the charge to implement the recommendations of the Ten-Year Plan. The Partnership’s first meeting was conducted in April of 2007 at which Mayor Mark D. Boughton gave the group their charge, which included addressing the housing needs of veterans.

The Partnership’s Financial Resources and Fundraising Committee was assigned primary responsibility for implementing the veterans housing recommendations. The committee held a focus group with local for-profit and non-profit housing developers and property owners to encourage interest in the development of housing opportunities for veterans. The result of this meeting was that a local non-profit housing development corporation stepped forward to express the desire to work with interested partners to develop a transitional housing facility for veterans. Other developers and property owners expressed interest in participating in efforts to create permanent housing for veterans.

Mayor Boughton sought and received a commitment from Roger Johnson, Director of the VA Connecticut Healthcare System to have VA staff members work with the City to develop housing opportunities for veterans. Permission was also received to have a VA staff member serve as an appointed member of the Danbury Housing Partnership.

In order to facilitate preparation of a comprehensive plan to create transitional and permanent housing opportunities for veterans in Danbury, an informal Veterans Housing Workgroup was formed. Headed by the Mayor’s Chief of Staff Michael McLachlan, the workgroup includes representatives of the Danbury Housing Partnership, the Housing Authority of the City of Danbury, the Non-Profit Development Corporation of Danbury (NPDCD), the Danbury Health, Housing & Welfare Department, the City Department of Veterans Affairs and the VA Connecticut Healthcare System.

The Veterans Housing Workgroup developed a comprehensive strategy designed to address the full range of veterans housing needs from emergency shelter to affordable homeownership. The workgroup also has worked collaboratively to help prepare applications for funding to the United

States Department of Veterans Affairs for transitional housing. City staff attended technical assistance training regarding preparation of the VA grants.

## The Plan

The plan contains three major elements designed to provide a continuum of housing opportunities for veterans in our community.

### **1. Emergency Housing and Phase One Transitional Housing**

The first element of the plan involves an integrated approach to get homeless veterans off the street and into a safe environment where their needs can be evaluated. This will include an expanded outreach effort to identify and connect with homeless veterans who may not otherwise seek assistance. The City’s Health, Housing & Welfare Department will take the lead in implementing this phase of the plan with the assistance of the VA Connecticut Healthcare System and other community partners.

The City shelter on New Street will play a key role in this effort. The City will be submitting a “Per Diem” grant request to the United States Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to expand services at the shelter to include five beds for homeless veterans along with individualized supportive services. This will enable the City to provide homeless veterans with an immediate place to stay while their needs are evaluated and they start receiving needed supportive services.

Phase One of the transitional process will include an assessment of each veteran for psychosocial needs by an assigned caseworker. An action plan will then be creating addressing the individual training and service needs of the client. The medical and behavioral health needs of veterans will be addressed with the cooperation of the VA through the VA Medical Clinic on Germantown Road in Danbury or, if necessary, the VA medical center in West Haven. Veterans will also be connected with the appropriate mental health, substance abuse, job training, job placement, educational training, financial assistance/management or other services appropriate to their individual needs. Caseworkers will assist veterans with placement in the Phase 2 Transitional Facility to be developed or to placement in permanent housing as the opportunity arises.

This plan will allow the City to provide homeless veterans with immediate access to safe housing, medical care, supportive case management and other assistance required to start them on the path to permanent housing. The goal is to welcome our veterans home by helping them becoming fully reintegrated into the community they served with such distinction.

### **2. Phase 2 Transitional Housing**

This element of the plan involves the creation of a more complete Phase 2 transitional housing facility where veterans can be transferred to from the shelter or referred through community partners. The facility will provide the environment and on-site supportive services necessary for our veterans to complete the transition to permanent housing in the community. This project will involve the acquisition and renovation of a building designed to provide rooms housing between five to eight veterans along with appropriate meeting rooms where certified case managers can meet

with their clients. The facility will be designed to provide separate quarters for female veterans with appropriate privacy provisions. Veterans will be able to live at the transitional center for up to two years while they receive supportive services and assistance to transition to permanent housing.

A second application will be submitted to the United States Department of Veterans Affairs seeking “Capital Grant” funding to help finance the acquisition and rehabilitation of a suitable site for the transitional facility. If awarded the grant, the facility would also be considered for VA funding to help off-set the operating costs of the transitional units.

The Non-Profit Development Corporation of Danbury (NPDCD) has agreed to play a leading role in this project by submitting the application to the VA and serving as the developer. NPDCD will acquire and renovate the building with assistance from the City of Danbury and the Housing Authority of the City of Danbury. Supportive services for our veterans would be provided under this proposal by local social service organizations, such as Catholic Charities an organization with certified veterans counselors and experience in supportive housing. Dream Homes Community Center, the community’s designated point of entry, will assist with assessment and referral of our veterans. The goal of the proposal is to prepare formerly homeless veterans to fully reintegrate into our community and to help them attain safe and affordable permanent housing.

In recognition of the intense competition for VA grant funding, the workgroup will be pursuing contingency plans that would enable a transitional facility to be established even if the VA grant application is not successful. This will require the continued cooperative efforts of the workgroup members and other community partners to identify and secure local funding sources to ensure the success of the project.

### **3. Permanent Housing Opportunities**

The final crucial element of this comprehensive plan is the creation of a wide range of permanent housing opportunities for our veterans. The goal of the plan is to create over the next eight years a minimum of thirty units of affordable permanent housing for veterans in Danbury consisting of the following:

- Permanent Supportive Housing Units
- Affordable Rental Units
- Affordable Homeownership Units

A wide range of housing options is required to meet the diversity of housing needs and goals of our veterans. Veterans are not a monolithic group. Their needs range from an emergency bed to enable a homeless veteran to get off the street to an affordable starter home for a young family headed by a veteran. Some veterans require extensive supportive services to recover from the effects of physical or emotional wounds, while others need only a chance for a job and an affordable place to live. Providing an array of housing choices means that this diverse group will be able to contribute to the Danbury community the energy and skill they demonstrated while in the service of their country.

The provision of permanent housing opportunities will make it possible for our homeless veterans to complete the journey from homelessness to transitional housing to a permanent home in their

community. For some of our formerly homeless veterans, this will require supportive housing where they can live in their own apartment but continue to receive the degree of supportive services appropriate for their individual needs. Several strategies can be pursued to accomplish this end, including partnering with private property owners to make existing units available through the use of vouchers or to work with interested for-private or not-for-profit developers to create new supportive units through renovation or new construction.

Some veterans may not require on-going supportive services; they just need an affordable place to live. This group may include individual veterans (male or female), families headed by a veteran or single parent families headed by either a male or female veteran. The creation of affordable rental units is crucial to meeting the needs of this group of veterans as they learn a new profession, establish themselves in a new career or seek to start families and raise children. More traditional housing financing programs and tools may be used to create such housing, but the housing must be designed and targeted to meet the needs of veterans. Partnering with for-profit and not-profit developers and property owners, such as those identified as the result of the Partnership’s focus group on veterans housing, should result in the creation of affordable rental opportunities for veterans either through construction subsidies or rental voucher subsidies.

Finally, Danbury is committed to providing the American dream of home-ownership to those who have defended America. The final element of this plan is, therefore, the creation of homeownership opportunities for veterans and their families either through new housing construction or the acquisition and rehabilitation of existing dwellings. We note as a best practices model the Common Ground project in New Haven in which a collaborative effort developed a new two-family home, with one unit occupied by a veteran first-time homeowner and the second unit occupied as a rental by another veteran.

The City will pursue the creation of homeownership opportunities for veterans in single-family homes, two-family homes or condominiums.

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