

# A New Outpost in the Civilian World

By ELSA BRENNER JUNE 3, 2007

LAST week Westhab, a nonprofit organization that has built and managed housing, mostly for homeless families and singles, for 26 years, opened its first residence for veterans: a century-old Victorian home in Yonkers renovated for \$1.1 million.

The refurbished three-story home for 12 men is one of several that the group is planning for veterans in the next two years, said Robert A. Sanborn, Westhab's vice president for real estate.

The shift in focus for the Elmsford-based organization follows a sharp decline in the number of homeless singles and families in Westchester, Mr. Sanborn said, largely a result of a rent supplement program instituted by the county about three years ago for people on public assistance.

Because the program enabled many to find permanent housing, Westchester's numbers, which peaked in the early 1990s at 1,000 homeless families, have fallen to about 320. At the same time, though, the plight of veterans in transition has grown worse because of cuts in financing for Section 8 and other federal housing programs.

Homeless veterans are not included in the county's programs for singles and families, said Betty Gilmore, manager of the behavioral health rehabilitation program in the northern Westchester at the Montrose campus of the Department of Veterans Affairs' Hudson Valley Health Care System.

Also, the gentrification of many marginal neighborhoods has driven jobless veterans out of many Westchester cities and towns, forcing some of them into

crowded and often substandard housing elsewhere, Ms. Gilmore explained.

Until Westhab's recent entrance into the picture, there were only a handful of groups, including the Volunteers of America and Common Ground, providing some transitional housing for them, she said.

"It's been a confluence of events that brought the V.A. and Westhab together," Mr. Sanborn said of his group's agreement to build housing in conjunction with the government. His organization, which owns and manages about 1,500 units of below-market-rate housing, had been looking for other groups in need.

"The need for housing for homeless veterans has always been there," he noted, "but until recently, homeless families and singles demanded most of our attention."

In addition to building and managing transitional and permanent housing for veterans, Westhab has recently been adding to the limited stock of work-force housing in the county.

Each of the three floors in the newly refurbished residence at 28 Pier Street in a working class neighborhood of Yonkers has four bedrooms, one kitchen, two baths and a communal area. The house is set up as a three-family structure with one kitchen per floor so that it complies with city zoning laws, said David Berridge, the owner of David Berridge Architects in Midtown Manhattan, which designed the project.

The first floor is accessible to those with disabilities. The juxtaposition of bedrooms and common space on each floor enables the residents to interact with one another and yet retain their privacy, he said.

"Vets in special-needs programs like living in an environment with other vets who have shared similar experiences," Ms. Gilmore noted. "There's a strong peer-support element at work."

The 12 men who will be moving to the new Westhab housing in Yonkers later this spring are now in the in-patient rehabilitation program run by the V.A. at its Franklin Delano Roosevelt Campus in Montrose. Many of the unemployed men, representing a wide spectrum of ages, have been suffering from post-traumatic stress

disorder, substance abuse, physical disabilities or mental illness.

Under the agreement between Westhab and the V.A., the men will spend 18 months to two years in the building in Yonkers as a transitional step and receive counseling from the nonprofit's staff and others aimed at helping them find employment and permanent quarters.

The four-month rehabilitation program in Montrose discharges about 175 veterans a year, but, Ms. Gilmore said, "because we're not in the housing business," until now they have had to find their own housing once they became outpatients.

Many troubled veterans, some of whom are disabled, have been able to afford only substandard living quarters in poor neighborhoods with high rates of crime and drug abuse — "a situation that is not conducive to their efforts to sustain economic independence and solve physical and emotional problems," she added.

The federal government provides \$31 a day per individual for transitional housing, but it has been difficult, especially in Westchester where the cost of housing is quite high, to find an agency able to coordinate its resources with the federal government's, she said. The need for housing for this group is expected to deepen as veterans from Iraq and Afghanistan are discharged.

Financing for the initial veterans project in Yonkers has come from the United States Departments of Veterans Affairs and Housing and Urban Development, the Federal Home Loan Bank, the city of Yonkers and the Leviticus 25:23 Alternative Fund, a not-for-profit financial intermediary in Elmsford.

With that project almost ready for occupancy, Mr. Sanborn said, his group is preparing to break ground next month on a \$10 million six-story building in New Rochelle with 25 housing units — four for veterans and the others for working families.

Westhab is also planning to build a 43-unit \$16 million building in Greenburgh, with seven units set aside for veterans.

Another \$9 million building with 33 units of transitional and permanent housing is planned in Yonkers, all of its units designated for single homeless

**veterans.**

**In choosing locations, Mr. Sanborn said, Westhab looks for easy access to medical services, public transportation and employment possibilities. “It also should be a safe neighborhood,” he said, “and toward that end, we look at the local crime statistics, and the history of a place. The neighborhood shouldn’t work against their rehabilitation.”**

**In all, Westhab has more than \$100 million in construction due to be completed in the next few years for veterans and working families.**

**The organization also recently expanded to provide below-market-rate housing in the Bronx and in Stamford and Norwalk in Connecticut, Mr. Sanborn said.**

**In addition, Antares Real Estate, a developer in Greenwich, has designated Westhab as its affordable-housing partner for its \$3.5 billion 80-acre proposed mixed-use development of the Stamford waterfront.**

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