

## Connecting Veterans with the Community Combating Homelessness

### Omni Turning Point – Connecting Vets with the Community

#### Introduction:

In the United States, approximately 40 percent of homeless men are veterans. The United States Department of Veterans Affairs estimates that 131,000 veterans are homeless on any given night, and approximately twice that number are homeless over the course of a year. The housing needs of these men and women who have served our country are similar to that of all homeless persons but may require specialization given the experience of many veterans especially those returning from war.

Eliminating homelessness among veterans has long been a focus of Rhode Island's homelessness programs as well as programs at Rhode Island Housing. The recently adopted state plan to end homelessness, Opening Doors Rhode Island, formalized that focus by setting a goal of ending homelessness among Rhode Island veterans in five years. As a small state that has already dedicated a significant number of transitional and permanent supportive housing to assisting this key population, that goal is one that we feel is achievable and Rhode Island Housing partnered with many groups to develop the plan that has been accepted by the State of Rhode Island.

#### The Challenge:

Outreach and provision of services to chronically homeless veterans is particularly challenging. Many live (or remain hidden) within the extensive homeless shelter environment in Rhode Island. Significant planning has been applied to develop an outreach plan, which will successfully serve this population. The outreach plan targets chronically homeless veterans and long-term homeless veteran families, and incorporates several key strategies. The Rhode Island Veterans Action Center (RIVAC) has extensive experience in providing services to homeless veterans and has been uniquely positioned to identify chronically homeless veterans. RIVAC is one of six nonprofit Veterans Service Organizations nationwide that has been approved to represent individuals so that they may obtain VA benefits from the federal government. In addition, RIVAC works closely with our VA Office, the Veterans Skilled Nursing Home in Bristol, and the VA Hospital in Providence as well as with other homeless support groups. RIVAC targets outreach to shelters across the state to identify veterans in need of housing and services.

While RIVAC has extensive expertise in serving the needs of veterans in Rhode Island, they lack housing development experience. ***Partnerships become key to success.*** With the assistance of the Rhode Island Local Initiative Support Corporation (LISC) office and the Corporation for Supportive Housing (CSH), RIVAC established a relationship with Omni Development Corporation (Omni), a Providence-based nonprofit community development corporation. Omni is a seasoned affordable housing real estate developer, focusing on family rental housing, elderly/ disabled housing, commercial property development and homeownership. Omni works statewide but has focused development activity in several Providence neighborhoods and North Providence. Omni's development experience, combined with RIVAC's service resources, provided the perfect partnership to respond to the needs of Rhode Island veterans.

#### Responding to Needs:

Last year, there were 275 homeless veterans in Rhode Island according to our Homelessness Management Information System (HMIS). Another 76 formerly homeless veterans were served in Permanent Supportive Housing (PSH). Every year, during the last 10 days of January, a Point-In-Time (PIT) count is also conducted to provide a snapshot of the number of sheltered and unsheltered homeless in Rhode Island on

that day. This year's PIT took place on January 25 and showed a significant increase in homelessness in Rhode Island. Despite the overall increases however, Rhode Island saw significant progress in addressing the number of chronically homeless and homeless veterans, which are priority populations under Rhode Island's Continuum of Care.

- 15 percent decrease in the number of chronically homeless
- 21 percent decrease in the number of homeless veterans

The Turning Point development located at 1380 Broad Street, Providence, provides a supportive housing community for veterans and their families in South Providence. The existing vacant commercial buildings were a blighting influence upon the Washington Park neighborhood and have been transformed into homes for veterans, accompanied by lower-level commercial space that house services for the veterans and a police substation.

The development provides 14 homes for very low-income veterans who are disabled and homeless or at risk of homelessness. Ten of the 14 apartments have been set aside for veterans who are chronically homeless. Supportive services for the residents are provided by RIVAC.

There is multipurpose space on the ground floor of 1380 Broad Street where RIVAC provides supportive services such as assistance in obtaining VA benefits and healthcare, job placement services, workplace skills training, computer literacy courses, Activities of Daily Living (ADL) services, transportation, case management and referrals for mental health and substance abuse services. The model recognizes the fact that housing needs can be met by building homes that provide comprehensive supportive services. However, programs, which recognize and acknowledge the veteran experience are more helpful in assisting veterans make the difficult transition from highly structured service to our country to everyday life.

The initiative involved the demolition of 1380 Broad Street, a former one-story retail establishment, and substantial rehabilitation of two apartments located on an adjacent site. 1380 Broad Street has been newly constructed as a three-story, mixed-use building consisting of 12 apartments on two stories and 3,500 square feet of ground floor commercial space. A Providence Police substation occupies approximately 300 square feet of the ground floor, with the balance of square footage dedicated to services providing further stability to the development and the surrounding neighborhood. The development has added over 13,581 square feet of newly constructed space on Broad Street, a major artery through the City of Providence. The development serves as an attractive anchor and gateway into the Washington Park neighborhood and a place for veterans to call home.

### **Successful Collaboration:**

Early predevelopment funding and the ability to maintain site control or acquire property is a challenge for our community development corporations and service providers. For Turning Point, CSH, LISC and Rhode Island Housing collaborated to provide the resources necessary to overcome these challenges. LISC and CSH invested predevelopment capital early on so that feasibility studies could be conducted, plans and specifications developed and professionals engaged to move the project through zoning. Rhode Island Housing provided acquisition financing for the sites and held them in its Land Bank until all financing could be assembled for the project. Various planning meetings engaged key officials of the state and stakeholders engaged with the veterans' community. The connections included Rhode Island Veterans Affairs officials, key personnel in the homeless service community and our skilled development staff.

The property at 1380 Broad Street had been vacant for a decade. The decline of the site negatively impacted the surrounding neighborhood; it was a nuisance for the City and neighborhood. The property at 22-24

Calla Street, contiguous to 1380 Broad Street, was a vacant foreclosure further contributing to neighborhood decline. Turning Point represented an opportunity for the collaborative to serve a population with tremendous need for housing and services. A nuisance has been transformed into a sanctuary.

The development serves a twofold purpose. It provides revitalization on Broad Street, which has been a focus area for the City's Planning Department, in addition to providing much needed low cost housing for veterans who require significant services. The development's proximity to retail, commercial and transportation further enhances the benefits to be derived by the veterans who live here.

**Conclusion:**

In a state where 25 percent of renters pay more than 50 percent of their income for housing, Turning Point provides critically-needed affordable homes within a highly developed urban neighborhood. For years, housing prices have greatly outpaced the incomes of Rhode Islanders. Rising unemployment, stagnant or falling incomes, and the high number of foreclosures continue to have a significant impact on families and individuals in Rhode Island. Combined, these factors highlight the importance of creating and making available a full continuum of affordable choices as part of the state's economic strategy and safety net. Particularly vulnerable to the economy in Rhode Island are our very low-income special needs groups like veterans. Shelters are overwhelmed by the demand – numbers of homeless individuals and families continue to increase.

Turning Point offers 14 permanent supportive apartments. Rents for the development are established to be affordable to individuals and families at or below 40 percent of area median income. The minimum gross rent is set at \$385 and will increase as veterans become more self sufficient. The average one-bedroom market rent in the City of Providence is \$836. The 50 percent tax credit rent is \$685. The average market rent for a two-bedroom apartment in Providence is \$963 with a 50 percent tax credit rent of \$822. Accordingly, this development will serve the most difficult to house veterans and their families who have incomes well below the income required to live in Providence.

**How the program responds to the judging criteria:**

*Innovative:* embraces the supportive services model in conjunction with safe, affordable homes.

*Replicable:* partnerships and service model can be replicated in other states with similar resources.

*Responds to an important state housing need:* with more servicemen and women returning from service every day and high housing costs outpacing wages, this development and the programs that contribute to its success are essential.

*Has a proven track record of success:* homes combined with services tailored to meet a specific population's needs have been proven time and again as effective in supplying the support required to fully integrate this population into the community.

*Provides benefits that outweigh costs:* helping those who have served our country while also removing blighted properties from our communities are two outcomes that cannot be measured and outweigh costs in terms of social benefits.

*Demonstrates effective use of resources:* the program utilizes effective use of resources with funding from various partners targeted to the development with appropriate services to ensure success.

*Effectively employs partnerships:* local partnerships with service providers, veterans groups, housing partners and statewide advocates for housing and homeless issues have been forged and strengthened.

*Achieves strategic objectives:* our efforts are a key component to keeping people, especially those with special needs, in safe, healthy homes while also aiding neighborhoods from further erosion.











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