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## **Protecting Vulnerable Residents A Vital Component Of Affordable Housing**

*Public-Private Partnerships Create Housing For Commonwealth's Veterans*

By Elizabeth Collins | Special To Banker & Tradesman | Feb 12, 2017



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Massachusetts has much to be proud of when it comes to providing affordable housing solutions for populations in need. Its commitment to tackling a challenging and complex problem has made it the envy of many other states. For-profit and the not-for-profit organizations have collaborated in our state to build a network of housing opportunities which are sophisticated and reflect a forward-thinking vision.

Specifically, the industry recognizes that there is much more to the “affordable housing solution” than merely well-built housing units at affordable rental rates. Yes, that is of course a key component, and represents a giant step forward from a temporary shelter. However, good housing is not the whole solution. The challenges of finding, developing and filling affordable housing units must be supplemented with supportive services, the lack of which can contribute to homelessness in the first place.

One population within the homeless community deserving of attention and action is our veteran population. U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) Point In Time Survey shows that in the United States approximately 57,849 veterans are homeless on any given night and another 1.2 million veterans are at risk of homelessness due to poverty and/or a lack of family and social support networks.

We see the plight of the homeless veteran in Massachusetts as improving, but still in need of additional bold initiatives to increase both the number of units and the ease with which supporting services can be delivered.

Veterans returning from military service encounter a number of issues; choosing between a shelter and a permanent housing solution should not be one of them. Whether younger veterans returning from recent conflicts or a Vietnam veteran who is struggling with behavioral or health issues that may have been a result of his/her tour of duty, many veterans deal with the after-effects of conflict which can impair their ability to secure meaningful employment or traditional housing. Life experiences can get in the way. Veterans may be dealing with PTSD, substance abuse or other mental issues and will desperately need a suite of support services to help them cope with their personal issues.

The Massachusetts Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD) has funded a number of housing initiatives in support of the homeless, and homeless veterans.

In addition to the state's support of affordable housing initiatives, there has also been federal support, outlined in a 2009 statement by President Barack Obama and VA Secretary Eric K. Shineski, whose goal was to end veteran homelessness by the end of 2015. The Veterans Affairs Supportive Housing program, jointly administered by the VA and HUD, has proven to be very effective in providing rental assistance and case management services for homeless veterans.

In addition to the DHCD and its sister state agency, the Community Economic Development Assistance Corporation, the homeless veteran has a friend in the Department of Veterans Affairs Enhanced-Use Lease Program (EUL), an important component of the VA's mission to end veteran homelessness and the department's overall asset management program. Through this program, the VA ground leases underutilized real estate under its jurisdiction or control to the private sector for up to 75 years for the purpose of developing supportive housing for homeless and at-risk veterans and their families. Developers are able to create housing where veterans are provided with an expanded range of services and direct access to medical and clinical services offered at VA medical center campuses.

The direct services to veterans are in the form of supportive housing. Supportive services provided can include on site case management, peer support groups, job training, financial management assistance, recreational and health and well being programs, community gardens computer/technology centers, community meeting and socializing rooms, fitness centers and senior companion programs.

Here in Massachusetts, we can see concrete examples of how public-private partnerships with developers, federal, state and local agencies have collaborated in reducing veterans' homelessness. These partnerships enabled a for-profit developer to create permanent supportive housing developments. These include the 33-unit Pleasant Street Apartments in Beverly, and two developments located on VA Medical Center campuses, one at Bedford Green, where a 70-unit development for homeless veterans 55 and older recently opened, and the 14-unit Howard House in Brockton. We succeed when the private, nonprofit and government sectors come together to fix a societal problem – that being permanent affordable housing for homeless veterans. These, and others projects, represent

good steps along the road to eliminating homelessness for veterans and addressing a key part of the affordable housing issue in the state.

What can we all do better? Any developer or organization seeking to develop housing for veterans must do so with an eye toward being certain that supportive services are either in-house or conveniently nearby, and wherever feasible to have skilled professionals in-house to see that the appropriate levels of support are in place. In seeking to expand the available stock of housing for homeless veterans, develop a plan that factors the cost of bringing services to the building into the underwriting, rather than trying to keep positions funded with recurring grants.

Both public and private entities benefit when existing housing stock is preserved, and when lending institutions look favorably upon the development of additional housing opportunities. Economic incentives for developers can also go a long way toward helping them to enthusiastically advocate for new housing. And, of course, the trend toward replacing shelters with permanent housing is a big step forward.

We've come a long way – but there is still further to go.

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