

Housing Homeless Veterans

Navy Admiral and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Mike Mullen was recently an honored guest at a dinner hosted by Soldier On, a non-profit dedicated to homeless veterans in Massachusetts. The event culminated a day in which ground was broken for a new home ownership model for homeless veterans.

Right now the site is parking lot, but it will be soon turned into a \$6 million, 39-unit permanent housing complex called the Gordon H. Mansfield Veterans Community in honor of the former deputy Secretary of the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, who is a highly decorated disabled veteran.

The complex will be funded by a combination of federal, state and private funds, according to Steven Como, executive vice president at Soldier On. The funds include two federal earmarks totaling \$1.9 million; \$2.6 million from the state through HOME funding to stabilize projects financed by the Low-Income Housing Tax Credit - the engine of affordable housing production for the past two decades, and \$700,000 from a local bank.

Working closely with federal agencies, including the VA, HUD, and the Council, Soldier On knows that it takes partnerships from every level of government - federal, state and county - church groups, civic organizations and the private sector to make this project a success.

The groundbreaking brought together 200 veterans along with local, state and federal agencies, other non-profits, local banks and members of the community with a stake in the first-ever limited equity housing project for veterans.

Veterans Community is designed for single, formerly homeless veterans who have successfully completed the transitional housing program. The project gives the veterans the opportunity to buy equity shares in the property, which will also be managed by veterans. Under the limited equity arrangement, the value of their shares will be held in trust and become part of their estates. If they decide to move out, they will get their money back. The veterans will continue to receive supportive services as needed.

At the event, Soldier On president John "Jack" Downing said that the VA provides a host of services and that his non-profit, which has been assisting homeless vets since 1994, is filling in the gaps to help those who have served our country reclaim their lives and their place in the community.

Berkshire County has exerted much leadership and political will in joining communities partnered in 10-year plans to end homelessness. The Berkshire County Legislative delegation and the caring people in Pittsfield and Berkshire County are offering their support.

