

Harbor Place

Supportive Housing in Vermont

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CHAMPLAIN HOUSING TRUST

Where there are good community relations, residents often embrace supportive housing for the homeless.

Champlain Housing Trust has long been known for good, affordable housing in Vermont. But by the time a strategic-planning retreat was organized in winter 2013, there was a growing realization among staff members that housing is not enough. As the small groups reported out, a theme emerged loud and clear: essentially, “We need to do more for those whose lives are most precarious.”

Champlain’s staff comprises 85 people, most of whom are on the front lines every day—taking 140 applications a month when only 10 can be accepted, helping applicants and housing residents to access emergency services for food and utilities, staving off foreclosure or eviction, and working through clients’ credit problems. They know when more than housing is needed.

Although Vermont did not have a real estate crash in 2008, its economy felt the aftershocks, and people at the lowest end of the economic ladder lost jobs, benefits, and hours of work while the bills continued to come in—or rise. Rents went up by 40 percent at the same time that fewer people found they could move from renting to homeownership. Gas and oil prices soared. Once the federal Section 8 rent subsidies were slashed by 800—a huge hit for a small state—everyone knew that something had to change. The board agreed: the next three years would be dedicated to addressing rising homelessness through new measures of prevention, service, and support.

Overflowing Shelters

The first call to action came quickly and in an unexpected way. In spring 2013, the Vermont media widely reported—and legislators hotly debated—the need for a 50 percent increase in state expenditures over the previous winter to cover motel stays for eligible homeless individuals and families on cold nights when shelters were full.

Members of the public had been largely unaware that a “cottage industry” had grown up as a result of increased and chronic homelessness, and they were concerned. Others saw the motel-voucher system as ripe for abuse, imagining taxpayer-funded “staycations.” The truth was less colorful but equally discouraging. The motels participating in the program were often in rough economic straits themselves. They were magnets for illicit activities and unsafe for the many children housed in them. Because motel placements were strictly an emergency measure, the state had no data on outcomes and no systematic path to provide the homeless with more-permanent housing and services.

As the controversy raged, the state government sought to limit the use of motels by tightening up eligibility, a necessary measure but one that elicited a new wave of criticism that rendering people ineligible for assistance would ultimately be more costly.

In light of the growing need, Champlain Housing Trust decided to get into the motel business. Four months after the staff retreat, the nonprofit was drafting a contract to purchase an Econolodge on Route 7, just South of Burlington, to supplement overflowing shelters by offering emergency housing and services.

We knew the new facility, which we named Harbor Place, had to be up and running before the next winter. After pricing the 59-



room property, Chief Operating and Financial Officer Michael Monte and the trust's developer, Amy Demetrowitz, set about crafting acquisition and operating scenarios that would enable us to provide shelter with services at the site.

We had primary financing from the Vermont Community Loan Fund, grants from Fletcher Allen Health Care, the Fanny Allen Foundation, United Way of Chittenden County, and the Vermont Housing and Conservation Board. And with commitments from the state, the local community mental health agency, and the Fletcher Allen Health Care hospital to refer people who needed housing, we projected a per night rate that was 23 percent lower than what the state had paid to house homeless people. We also established memoranda of understanding with service providers to ensure that counselors would be on site daily. We wanted those who received a voucher to get connected promptly with a service as part of their emergency housing.

The Econolodge had a sizeable main building, which we fitted up for the services and our on-site managers. The trust interviewed motel staff and hired half of them to supplement the property-management team for round-the-clock coverage, janitorial help, and repairs. The sellers wanted to keep operating through the foliage season, so we had only five days from acquisition to our first night as a shelter, November 1, 2013.

Government and Neighbors Turn on a Dime

The Harbor Place initiative represented a major mobilization from many departments. State government agreed early on to make it work, but it was difficult for state Human Services staff to shift their programs around fast to commit funds in a very different way. For example, instead of waiting for shelter overflows on cold nights to issue vouchers to any available motel on their list, they had to commit in advance to cover a percentage of nights at our site throughout the year so that we could service debt. They also had to agree to let us reject people for behavioral issues.

Fortunately, the projected savings and the ability to track outcomes won the day, and Champlain Housing Trust and its champions within Human Services were able to surmount every hurdle to gain the necessary approvals.

The next big concern was ensuring community support. We were already under construction in Shelburne, where the motel was located, on a different project, a multipartner development of 82 affordable homes (including 42 family apartments and two duplexes built by Habitat for Humanity) as well as 36 affordable apartments for seniors and extensive open-land conservation.

As was our practice, we had planned that site with lots of community input and had engaged local churches and service groups. Shelburne was a town that really came through for affordable housing. But our new venture was a completely different kind of effort, and by agreement with the seller, we could not have a big public process to build support. The existing zoning covered our planned use so there was no planning process either.

Fortunately, town manager Paul Bohne was not just a very

public advocate of affordable housing, he was chair of Champlain Housing Trust's board. He suggested that we speak to the police chief. Previously, the property had been such a notorious source of illegal activity that we had only to convince the police that we would manage it to be safe and peaceful, which we would have done for the residents anyway.

We believed that our good track record and our management plan would ensure that we would improve the safety and quality of the site and that that our improvements would be welcomed by community residents. We were nevertheless bowled over by their enthusiastic generosity and sense of obligation to help to the people staying at Harbor Place.

From opening day onward, we have been inundated with offers of food, clothes, volunteer services, holiday gifts for the children, and requests for lists of useful items. We have found a volunteer to coordinate all these supplies, and now we always have easy-to-prepare food, bus passes, and baby supplies at the site. In spring 2014, we had a volunteer day to paint and plant, and we are raising money for a play structure because there are always children at Harbor Place. In fact, 15 celebrated Christmas 2013 with us.

Harbor Place guests are moving into permanent housing at five times the rate of those placed at other motels. Through Champlain Housing Trust's credit-repair initiative, Ready-Set-Rent, those with purely economic barriers can be moved into apartments. Most of the residents have additional needs, and those are being addressed through caseworkers, who continue to work with them to support a successful move to permanent housing.

None of us could have predicted how cold and long the 2013–2014 winter would be. Harbor Place was full, and the funding plan worked. But we will not repeat exactly the same program. Being on site to track people's issues and place them in the hands of caring providers has opened a window on housing and shelter needs that have to be addressed.

By winter 2014–2015, we will have retooled Harbor Place with the new partners who will help us do so. The units with kitchens will be available for transitional rather than just emergency use, and families—especially those fleeing domestic abuse—may opt to stay longer and move after their permanent situation is resolved. A low-barrier shelter located most likely in Burlington will relieve a lot of the emergency use of motels, and additional permanent housing with health services should alleviate recurring emergency room use at the hospital. We also hope to have added a new rung of permanent housing for those in the greatest need, and other shelters at other locations.

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