



Credit: Gary Hall

Canal Street Veterans Housing

Winooski, Vermont

In February 2011, the Committee on Temporary Shelter (COTS) welcomed the first residents to Canal Street Veterans Housing. Canal Street is an innovative approach to veterans' assistance that COTS hopes will serve as a national example – creating *housing*, not shelter, for formerly homeless veterans. The program provides veterans with time to transition back into the community, allowing participants to stay up to 24 months.

"Veterans have sacrificed so much for this country, and we are so proud to have this beautiful new building to let them know how much we appreciate their service," said Rita Markley, COTS executive director. "Canal Street demonstrates that Vermont knows how to treat our veterans when they return home, offering them safe and decent housing."

The project is the result of the vision of one formerly homeless veteran, a passionate nonprofit – and \$1.2 million seed grant from the Veterans Administration.

During the height of U.S. military involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan, a Vietnam veteran named Marty Martinez, who had once been homeless himself, asked to meet with Rita. He had a simple question for her: What was COTS going to do to be *proactive* instead of *reactive* to a new generation of veterans who would soon be returning to Vermont? How, he asked, would COTS make sure what had happened to so many Vietnam veterans did not happen to another former soldier who had served his or her country? How could we ensure that those who returned would truly come home?

The answer began when COTS applied to the VA for a capital grant to build transitional housing for formerly homeless veterans. The VA responded with \$1.2 million; COTS was on its way.

COTS partnered with Housing Vermont on the 5.8 million project, which broke ground in October 2009. Canal Street was constructed with collaborative sources of funding, a mix of private and public support.

"This is a remarkable example of a coordinated, thoughtful response to providing services and housing to veterans," said Housing Vermont President Nancy Owens. "We welcomed the opportunity to combine our real estate development skills with the program experience of COTS."

About the program

Canal Street Housing provides veterans with *time* to transition back into the community. They are furthering their education, upgrading their job training skills and connecting with other local resources, including services for mental and physical health.

The first four floors are transitional units, a mixture of studio and two-bedroom apartments, each with its own bathroom and kitchen. A program suite on the main floor includes a community kitchen and family room. A full-time case manager and a 24-hour live-in residential manager (and former veteran) are also on site. The top two floors are permanent, affordable housing.

Canal Street is unique among veterans programs in a few ways:

- Independent apartments vs. traditional dorm-style accommodations: This gives veterans privacy but still allows for unit cohesion in the shared program space.
- Ability to host men, women – and families: Generally, veterans in similar programs have to separate from their spouse and children to participate. Canal Street allows families to stay together. Canal Street is the only program like this in Vermont to serve veterans and their families.

In the program's first year, there have been many success stories, including:

- **12 veterans** who have successfully graduated from the program. They have moved into permanent housing and accomplished a number of their other goals, such as staying sober, working to rebuild good credit and saving money. Among the first graduates was a single dad, with his daughter, who moved into permanent housing earlier this year.
- Current residents include a female veteran and two families, including a National Guardsman, his wife and four young children.

From a graduate of the program: "This program and house has saved me in a few senses of the word. When I came here in April 2011, I did not have a job, a place to live, and I had not seen a VA health-care provider in a few years. Zpora Perry, the case manager for Canal Street Veterans Housing, accepted my application and introduced me to many VA and state employees who helped me with jobs, housing, health care ... etc. This program also made me feel like I belonged to something bigger than myself. I have very much enjoyed meeting and talking to other veterans and going on day trips the program has provided. This program has helped me stay sober for three years this month. ... I have been given a home here -- not just a physical home but also a state of mind home, and that is a great feeling."

About COTS

Canal Street Veterans Housing is a program of the Committee on Temporary Shelter (COTS). COTS is the largest service provider in Vermont for those who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless. The nonprofit offers shelter, homelessness prevention assistance, transitional and permanent housing programs for families and individuals. Learn more at www.cotsonline.org.