



NEW ENGLAND CENTER FOR HOMELESS VETERANS

EDUCATION | SUPPORT | EMPLOYMENT | HOUSING

Gifts of Hope Looking for a place to call home

"With demands for services continuing to rise, Wicked Local has designated the nonprofit as this year's recipient of its annual Gifts of Hope fundraising campaign."

The fourth in a six part series of reports being published in December in local papers throughout Greater Boston, Gatehouse Media and www.wickedlocal.com selected the NECHV as the 2012 recipient for the "Gifts of Hope" features.

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Disabled Navy Veteran Tom O'Leary was able to move in an accessible apartment in East Boston with the help of the New England Center for the Homeless.

WICKED LOCAL NEWTON
WITH NEWS FROM THE NEWTON TAB

By Chloe Gotsis
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Boston — For the past two years, Thomas O'Leary hasn't known where he'd sleep at night. His choices were limited to a motel or a homeless shelter.

But all that changed on Saturday when O'Leary, a 61-year-old Navy veteran, moved in to his own apartment in East Boston. The move was facilitated by the Boston-based New England Center for Homeless Veterans. O'Leary began coming to the center six months ago and has been sleeping in one of their 306 temporary beds while working with the

staff there to find a permanent home.

It'll be "a place to call home. Walk in the door and I'm home," said O'Leary during an interview at the center's headquarters at 17 Court St. in Boston. "A place that's mine, you know?" Finding a home has been a long and hard road for O'Leary.

O'Leary was living with girlfriend until two years ago when she moved into HUD Housing, leaving him homeless. Disease has deteriorated his lower spine, leaving the New York native reliant on a scooter. He is also battling lung cancer.

The New England Center for Homeless Veterans helps over 400 veterans like O'Leary find a home of their own each year.

"I couldn't have done it on my own," said O'Leary, who worked on Navy submarines from 1969 to 1976.

Up and out

O'Leary is also the center's Grand Circle Foundation's Up and Out Program recipient this month. When O'Leary moved into his new apartment in Maverick Square last weekend it was filled with furniture already arranged for him. The program filled O'Leary's apartment with gently used furniture, housewares and decorations and filled his refrigerator with food. Volunteers even had a glass of milk and a plate of cookies waiting for him.

"It is one hell of a Christmas present," O'Leary said.

O'Leary arrived at the center in April by way of another nonprofit veterans shelter in Lee, Mass.

– Soldier On – and wasn't optimistic about landing permanent housing in the Boston area. He said he expected the center to be just another temporary place to sleep, but was instead greeted with support from the center's staff including housing advocate Liz Casey and housing services manager Sarah Curran.

"It turned out to be a good stepping stone to my own place," he said.

On average, Curran and her staff place 25 to 30 veterans a month like O'Leary in permanent housing with help from the Boston Housing Authority and vouchers from the federal Veterans Affairs Supportive Housing program. She works with landlords around the state to place veterans in subsidized housing units. While the veterans are waiting for permanent housing, the center provides them with a bed on one of its three floors of transitional housing.

The staff also provides counseling and other services to veterans who face roadblocks to receiving housing, including a criminal record.

The center offers single veterans staying in the temporary beds the opportunity to shop in its free clothing store on the basement floor, a community kitchen and laundry area and other amenities. Veterans can stay in the transitional housing for a maximum of 24 months. The center is only able to help single veterans, not families.

Ages 20 to 80

The center also has four floors of low-income dormitory style permanent housing for veterans that are available on one-year leases through the Boston Housing Authority. The 59 units include a private bedroom with a dresser and bed and a shared kitchen and living room area.



The center is hoping to add 11 studio apartment style units for female veterans to its ninth floor.

Curran and her staff see a variety of veterans who range in age from 20 to 80 who have served in all branches of the armed services. The center has seen more than 400 veterans from the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars, according to Charlene Pontbriand, who is senior vice president of advancement at the center.



"With the economy, I've seen folks in here with master's degrees who have owned their own home," Curran said. "A lot of people have lost their job and need to get back on their feet. Some come directly from prisons."

The staff at the center also works to ensure the veterans are able to stay in their new homes once they move in. Curran said housing advocates follow up with veterans 60 days, six months and 12 months after they move in to their new home to see if they need any additional help.

O'Leary said he's looking forward to exploring his new neighborhood. He said he can picture himself bringing a book to Boston's Logan Airport, located near his new home on the MBTA's Blue Line, and reading while watching airplanes land and take off. In the six months he's been living in Boston, O'Leary said he's visited Boston's Museum of Fine Arts several times and hopes to become a more frequent visitor there.

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How you can help

You can donate money to the New England Center for Homeless Veterans.

Send a check or make an online donation. Check may be mailed to the New England Center for Homeless Veterans, 17 Court St., Boston, MA 02108 ATTN: Gifts of Hope. Or visit www.nechv.org or call 617-371-1882.