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Controversial SMOC housing program at Larry's Place to open next week

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A new gas line for the Larry's Place building on Lincoln Street was being installed Wednesday as one of the final steps before an open house next week. Residents are expected to move in by early December. (Matt Rocheleau for The Boston Globe).

By Matt Rocheleau, Globe Correspondent

The Southern Middlesex Opportunity Council (SMOC) has announced it will soon open Larry's Place, a housing program for homeless veterans recovering from substance abuse, which has been at the heart of an ongoing lawsuit.

In Oct. 2007, SMOC filed a [federal lawsuit](#) charging 15 town officials and citizens with an alleged conspiracy to discriminate against poor and disabled people. The lawsuit said an Internet-fueled campaign created a hostile atmosphere in Framingham that encouraged town officials to illegally stall the social service agency's plans to open Larry's Place as well as to proposal in 2005 to relocate Sage House, a home for recovering drug addicts and their families.

Town officials and defendants have denied the allegations, and the lawsuit remains in court.

Building Commissioner Michael Foley blocked SMOC's application for Larry's Place in Sept. 2007, because he said the Dover Amendment application did not include educational space or a common area. Dover Amendment proposals are required to have some religious or educational purpose to qualify.

The Zoning Board of Appeals overruled the building commissioner's decision several months later.

In an interview on Wednesday, Foley said appeals board reversed his decision because they received additional information from SMOC through the appeal process about the building's educational use that he had not been presented with.

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Foley added that he welcomes the opening of Larry's place.

"I think this is a great thing for the town," he said. A program designed to assist veterans "would be welcomed in any community ... [town officials] are not opposed to these types of programs."

According to SMOC's Director of Housing Operations Darlene Assencoa Mazurek, Larry's Place, which will hold a ceremonial open house on Veteran's Day, has already accepted about 10 residents through an application process, and she expects the program to be at its 19-resident capacity within a couple of months.

Eighteen veterans will move in once the building is ready in early December and will stay in the program for around six to 18 months until they can live independently. One resident director will also live in the building to supervise and aid the veterans.

"While these veterans are quite proud of their service to our country, they have struggled since their return to civilian life because of physical disabilities or behavioral health care concerns," SMOC's executive director Jim Cuddy said in a release announcing the opening. "Their return has sometimes been a difficult journey. Larry's Place is meant to be a home where they can share similar life experiences with other veterans, while receiving the critical support services they need and supporting each other as they work to be productive citizens once again,"

The housing program will allow residents to link with a variety of educational, employment and counseling services, with the goal of helping them achieve economic sufficiency and independence, said the release.

Residents will also participate in weekly group meetings and be assigned household chores such as housekeeping, property maintenance and cooking, the release said. A resident manager, who will live in the building, will oversee the daily operation of the house and the residents' activities.

SMOC will hold an open house at the handicapped-accessible Larry's Place at 90 Lincoln Street, directly across from the MetroWest Hospital, on Nov. 11 from 3:30 to 5:30 p.m.

"It's the perfect location for our residents who require access to an array of services," said Mazurek in the release of the building formerly used as SMOC office space. "We're proud of this new home and are excited about the tremendous opportunity 90 Lincoln Street will present to the veterans who will reside here."

The three-floor, 6,500-square-foot building, which is over 100 years old and was once a duplex before being used most recently as office space for SMOC, has undergone around \$650,000 in renovations since work began in March, said Gerard Desilets, SMOC's planning director.

The project received some of its funding from the state Department of Housing and Community Development, he said.

There are now 19 bedrooms, five bathrooms, a kitchen, laundry room and common space, including areas for residents to use computers to do work and search for employment, said site superintendent Steve Rando of BWK Construction Co., Inc., of Medfield, which has been working on the building's renovations.

He added that Larry's Place should be about 90 percent complete by the Nov. 11 open house.



Workers from BWK Construction Co., Inc., in Middleton put the finishing touches inside and outside the three-floor, 19-bedroom building on Lincoln Street. Renovations began in March, and according to site superintendent Steve Rando, the work should be about 90 percent complete by the Nov. 11 open house. (Matt Rocheleau for The Boston Globe)

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