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SMOC shelter ready to forget delayed permit controversy, give back to those who served

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Harry Serulneck, 91, of Framingham, (left) and David Patten, 39, a Norwood native, share stories about their respective military service and the difficulties they faced in returning to civilian life. The two met at a Veterans Day ceremonial open house for Larry's Place, a Framingham shelter for homeless veterans recovering from substance abuse. (Matt Rocheleau for The Boston Globe)

By Matt Rocheleau, Globe Correspondent

Harry Serulneck and David Patten met Wednesday afternoon and quickly found themselves swapping stories of their overseas military service. Even with a 52-year age difference between them, the two veterans found they shared similar experiences, including having had a tough time transitioning back to civilian life.

"It was hard to get started again. You don't want to do what you did before you went into the Army. It takes a good couple of years," said 91-year-old Serulneck, Brooklyn, N.Y. native and decorated World War II veteran, who has lived in Framingham since 1983.

He lived in California after his two-year stint with the Army ended in 1946 and, though he initially struggled to adjust, he eventually found work there.

For 39-year-old Patten who served in the 101st Airborne Division in Kosovo, the transition has been more challenging. Since his two years in the military ended in 2002, the Norwood native has suffered from post traumatic stress disorder, turned to substance abuse – marijuana – and now finds himself unemployed and homeless after a tree fell on a trailer where he was living in New Hampshire.

But, Patten has hope that he will be able to turn things around at a Framingham shelter for homeless veterans recovering from substance abuse, which is scheduled to open next month.

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"The first thing that's really most important is my sobriety," said Patten, who is looking forward to getting a roof over his head once Lincoln Street shelter receives the remaining inspections needed to allow residents to move in. "I can't stress enough how important programs like this are for veterans."

Last week, the Southern Middlesex Opportunity Council (SMOC) [announced the upcoming opening of Larry's Place](#), which has been a part of an ongoing, controversial lawsuit; but at yesterday's Veterans Day ceremonial open house, where Patten met Serulneck and toured his future home, SMOC leaders looked to turn the page.

"It took us four years ... We need to find ways to make peace with the community we provide services in. Our mission is to help this community, to help its people," said SMOC Executive Director James Cuddy. "The community needs to find peace in the services we provide."

"It's been a long haul, but it's always worth it in the end," said SMOC's Chief Operating Officer, Charles Gagnon.

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.

"I just want to bring greetings from the town," said Board of Selectmen Chair Ginger Esty, a defendant in the lawsuit, at the beginning of her speech to those on hand for the open house.

She then went on to address how veterans can be affected after spending time in the military.

"Once someone goes off to serve they've changed. They have different needs. As a mother of a helicopter pilot, I know they change. They're never the same."

According to SMOC's Director of Housing Operations Darlene Assenoco Mazurek, Larry's Place has 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 house manager will also live in the building to supervise and aid the veterans.

James Bushard, of Waltham, will be the house manager when Larry's Place opens. He said he suffered from alcoholism and mental health issues after his service in the Army during Vietnam, but has since recovered and earned a clinician's license.

"I bring that to the table, too, that there's a way out of it," said Bushard. "Experience is really important."

When he was homeless and trying to get back on his feet, he recalled staying in a much larger shelter in Boston with about 300 residents where he said "it was easy to just get lost."

"This is what this is all about. This kind of setup is what we need, not a big homeless shelter," said Serulneck, a retired SMOC board member, noting the proximity of the shelter to health and mental service facilities. "Something like this is a home away from home."

Housing Coordinator Ron Teixeira, also a veteran, will work directly with Bushard and the residents. Each resident will have their own case manager

who will help them create an individualized plan to move forward. Mary Shanahan, SMOC's supportive housing director who will also oversee the shelter, lost two brothers, who were veterans, to drug and alcohol abuse.

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.

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.

The shelter is named after Larry Mace, a veteran and former SMOC housing resident who struggled to stay sober and died in May 2007.

"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 last week 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."

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