

Room for hope

Homeless vets have new home in Northfield

THATCHER MOATS Staff writer

NORTHFIELD - George Hutchins recalls going "a little crazy" after returning from the Vietnam War. **Veterans** of that conflict in Southeast Asia were largely ignored or despised back home, Hutchins said, so he joined up with the only people who seemed interested in hearing what happened overseas: an outlaw biker gang called the "El Paso Rough Riders."

"A Vietnam **veteran** was an outcast," said Hutchins during a recent interview.

But decades later the frustration Hutchins and other **veterans** of the era experienced has blossomed into something positive - the **Veterans'** Place, a transitional facility for **homeless veterans** which officially opened last week in Northfield. Hutchins, a 72-year-old Moretown man, is the president of the nonprofit's board.

"Most of us who started this are Vietnam vets and frankly we were treated like crap after the Vietnam War and don't want to see that again," Hutchins said when he was asked why he got involved in the project. The **Veterans'** Place will house up to 26 former soldiers of all ages who previously had been **homeless**. The facility, which is in a former nursing home in a leafy Northfield neighborhood, received final approval from the U.S. Department of **Veterans** Affairs recently and will soon start admitting the roughly 15 **veterans** who are on a waiting list.

The official opening of the **Veterans'** Place comes two years after a formerly **homeless** Vietnam **veteran** who has since left the area hatched the idea for the facility.

Using a \$771,000 VA grant and a bank loan, the nonprofit organization bought the historic Mayo DeLary building on Vine Street last December and renovated.

The building was ideal for a transitional home because it previously had been a nursing home and was already divided into individual living spaces, said Mike Brennan, the program manager at the **Veterans'** Place.

"This particular structure, it's like it was sitting here waiting for us to come along," said Brennan.

Brennan, 52, could think of only one other transitional home for **veterans** in Vermont and said the **Veterans'** Place is the largest facility of its kind on the state.

Transitional housing is needed here, he said, and will be in even greater demand in the future because of the pending deployment of 1,500 Vermont National Guard soldiers, who will go to Afghanistan this winter.

"Unfortunately we're in a growth industry," said Brennan. Official and unofficial estimates say 170 to more than 200 **homeless veterans** live in Vermont, he said.

But establishing the **Veterans'** Place has not been without difficulty. The challenges have ranged from a lengthy wait for the VA's final approval to initial wariness in the community about the project.

"There was a rumor in the community that this was going to be a halfway house for drug addicts and sex offenders," said Brennan. "We had to reassure the community that that was not the case."

The concern was in part due to the location; the **Veterans'** Place is next door to the Northfield Middle and High School.

To reassure local residents, representatives from the **Veterans'** Place put on a public presentation.

Brennan stressed in an interview that each applicant will be subjected to a criminal background check and the place has a zero-tolerance policy for substance abuse. No one with a sex offense on their record will be admitted, he said, and serious violent criminals will not be allowed. The screening process will be done on a case-by-case basis, he said.

Place and program

The single and double rooms at the **Veterans'** Place, along with the suites designed for families, were still bare last week except for beds and dressers. Many of the rooms are still decorated with the floral wallpaper from the building's previous life.

In the basement are a commercial kitchen and a dining room.

"The rooms are simple, but for a lot of these guys a night off the street is a victory," said Brennan.

There are a number of **homeless** shelters in the state, but Brennan stressed that the **Veterans'** Place is not a shelter.

Shelters are an emergency stop, while transitional housing is a longer-term solution, he said. A person can stay at the **Veterans'** Place for up to two years while they get a job, save money, undergo counseling or do whatever it is they need to do to find a permanent living situation.

Plus, at shelters there is theft, people are more ashamed to be there, they resemble military barracks which can trigger unwanted emotions, and you're surrounded by strangers, he said.

"I saw a lot of people who had a lack of **hope**" at shelters, said Brennan, who was **homeless** for a time in Vermont and later worked in a shelter in Burlington.

Brennan also stressed, however, that the **Veterans'** Place is temporary and the goal is to help people sustain themselves.

"The day they arrive we start planning their departure," he said.

The **Veterans'** Place will be a structured environment where residents will be required to be "productive" by getting a job or volunteering in the community. They will have to do chores and keep their rooms clean.

They will put 30 percent of their income towards rent and some of that will be returned to them when they leave.

One key role of the **Veterans'** Place will be to connect **veterans** with the services and benefits available to the **veterans** through the VA. The facility has a large van that will be used to take residents to work, to do community service and appointments.

"If you want to pick a reason why a **veteran** is **homeless**, pick a reason," he said. "There are as many reasons as there are **veterans** on the street."