

COUNTY

Community Says “Welcome Home” to Homeless Vets



“I want to officially welcome you home,” said Colleen Merlo, LMSW, CEO of the Association for Mental Health and Wellness (MHAW), to several previously homeless veterans who have moved into safe, brand-new residences. At a ribbon-cutting ceremony on October 19, 2021, MHAW celebrated the completion of a \$2.4-million-dollar project to build permanent supportive housing for formerly homeless veterans in Suffolk County. The work included the renovation of a house in Medford, where the event took place, and the construction of new buildings in Riverhead and Mastic.

Suffolk County transferred the

three properties to MHAW under the Housing Our Homeless Heroes Act, legislation that the county enacted in 2014 with the aim of ending homelessness among veterans. The New York State Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance financed the construction through its Homeless Housing and Assistance Program. Under the Empire State Supportive Housing Initiative, the New York State Office of Mental Health will provide \$110,000 in annual operating funds.

“I applaud the state’s continued support of Suffolk County’s veteran population, which is one of the largest in the nation,” remarked State

Senator Anthony Palumbo. “This \$2.4 million will help to ensure that our most vulnerable veterans have access to safe, clean, and affordable housing while providing them with greater access to mental health and other critical services.” These services include employment and training opportunities, counseling, instruction in independent-living skills, connection to primary health care, substance-use treatment, and childcare.

The goal of MHAW’s program is to prevent chronic disease, promote well-being, and provide a healthy and safe environment in which veterans can live in a manner consistent with their abilities and values. The residents of the three homes — five men and one family consisting of a single mother and three children — have been moving in over the course of the last few months. All had been living in transient and sometimes dangerous conditions.

“We owe our veterans deep gratitude and much more than simply thanking them for their service,” observed State Assemblyman Steve Englebright. “I am very pleased that this project will help those vets who have a difficult time returning to

civilian life.”

Lieutenant Governor Brian Benjamin, who was on hand for the dedication, shared a similar view: “One of the things many of us cannot deny, regardless of our political ideology, regardless of where we’re from or how we got here, is that if it weren’t for our veterans and those who serve and protect us, we would not be able to have the life we have right here, right now. It is only right that we do everything we can to make sure that when they come home, they’re never labeled ‘homeless.’

“I also love the fact that it’s such a beautiful house,” he continued. “They deserve the best that we have. If we have that mindset and that spirit as

we take care of those who took care of us, I think we’ll be moving closer towards the great ideal of a country where everyone is created equal.”

MHAW looks forward to purchasing and rehabbing additional homes. “Thank you to County Executive Bellone, then County Legislator, now Assemblyman Steve Stern, and New York State for taking action to end veteran homelessness,” said Ms. Merlo in relation to the passing of the Housing Our Homeless Heroes Act. “The Association for Mental Health and Wellness is committed to meeting the current and emerging needs of those who have served our country.”

