

## VETERANS

# Former schools to become veterans housing in Winchendon

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**Key Points**

The apartments will be low-income, one-bedroom units for veterans.

A health clinic, services and community spaces will be included.

About 40,000 veterans live in Worcester County, according to 2022 figures.

WINCHENDON – The sound of construction crews has replaced the echoes of elementary school students in the former Amro W. Streeter and Poland Street schools.

The structures are being renovated for 44 new low-income, one-bedroom apartments for veterans of the U.S. military.

The Montachusett Veterans Outreach Center secured the necessary funding last month from state and private sources to complete the transformation of the former schools into residences for veterans as part of the state's End Veteran Homelessness campaign.

The project, said MVOC Executive Director Stephanie Marchetti, has been in planning for six years. The final funding pieces fell into place on [Dec. 9 when the Healey/Driscoll administration](#) announced it was awarding more than \$10 million to the project – \$3 million from the Executive Office of Veterans Services and \$7.5 million from the Executive Office of Housing and Livable Communities.

The hammers started swinging immediately, Marchetti said, adding the organization hopes to take applications for the housing units by next January and open the residences by spring 2027. Funders include the Health Foundation of Central Massachusetts, the Home Depot Foundation and the [Robinson Broadhurst Foundation](#), an organization that focuses on projects in Winchendon.

“We cannot wait,” Marchetti said, explaining that the \$29 million project had been delayed several times. “Once the funding became available, it was full steam ahead.”

Crews working on Wednesday, Jan. 7, were already leveling the land surrounding the two buildings and digging out the area where the connector between the two schools will be located.

Planned are 44 one-bedroom apartments, most roughly 500 to 550 square feet. Also planned are a health clinic, community spaces and wraparound services for the residents. Marchetti anticipates that the residents will be former homeless veterans, similar to those the organization already houses.

“Stable housing saves lives,” Marchetti said, adding the outreach center operates both apartments and transitional housing for veterans. The 20 apartments are always occupied, and there is no wait list.

The state houses about 775 veterans through the End Veteran Homelessness project. Sixty veterans are Worcester County residents, according to a spokesman for the Executive Office of Veterans Services. More than 240,000 veterans

live in the Bay State, according to the state Mass.gov website, with almost half between 18 and 64.

The [Greater Boston Veterans Collaborative](#) estimates almost 40,000 veterans living in Worcester County in 2022, the latest numbers included on the organization's website. The site also lists veterans service organizations throughout the state, including services offered in Central Massachusetts.

"We're excited about the project, the town cares for its veterans," said Bill McKinney, Winchendon town manager. He said the housing complex is "close to the center if everything going on," and residents will be able to take advantage of the location, with the Winchendon [Senior Center and Council on Aging](#) next door, the large park and its proximity to the main street area.

"As a town, we are excited to see another positive resource for our veterans," McKinney said.

The two schools, purchased along with 3 acres of surrounding land for \$1 from Winchendon, will add to the center's housing stock. And with the land, there's room for expansion.

While more housing is necessary, Marchetti also envisions the green space as an extension of the new housing development, a space for celebrations and activities from the organization's annual July 4 barbecue to events that embrace the wider community.

"Veterans deserve more than our gratitude, they deserve safe and stable homes," Marchetti said.

Reporters from the Telegram & Gazette were accompanied on a walk-through by Marchetti and construction site supervisor Ben Hebert of [Commodore Builders](#), the largest veteran-owned construction company in New England.

"Working in existing buildings presents different construction challenges," Hebert said. As the demolition proceeded, the crew learned the structures had not been built on the same level, with one building sitting higher than the other.

The plans to install an elevator in the building connector to ensure compliance with Americans with Disabilities Act standards had to be revised to include an elevator that made half-stops to accommodate the different levels, Hebert said.

Some original features, including some of the hardwood floors, wooden wainscoting, ceramic and brick window sills, tall windows and ceilings, archways and some of the plaster-and-lathe walls, will remain in place.

"We don't want the buildings to lose their character," Marchetti said.

However, new energy-efficient windows, insulation and modern heating systems will replace the two boilers used to heat water and generate steam in the Streeter School. The changes will ensure that the veterans enjoy all the conveniences of modern homes, Marchetti said.

The entrances used by children will be maintained, Hebert said. While the original entrance to the Poland Street School on Oak Street that features the school's name will be maintained, it will serve as a patio housing containers planted with local vegetation.

Hebert enjoyed overseeing the demolition process, catching a glimpse of bygone construction methods and workarounds, pointing to the floor joists and hangers revealed by the work.

"It's fascinating to see it all," Hebert said. The Streeter School, named for Amro W. Streeter, a turn-of-the-century resident born in New Hampshire in 1858, was constructed in 1939. The Poland Street School was built in 1924. The

latter, which has been empty for longer than the Streeter School, was found to contain asbestos and needed more complex remediation.