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November 12th construction start for Advocates' residences at 20 Vernon Street

Eight affordable housing units for persons with disabilities

FRAMINGHAM, MASSACHUSETTS, November 06, 2008 ... An innovative project more than 12 years in the making will finally get underway on November 12 as construction begins to convert a former nursing home at 20 Vernon Street in Framingham Center into eight units of affordable housing for clients of Advocates, Inc. recovering from mental illness.

The project is fully funded through federal and state grants, including a \$1,125,400 federal grant from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) under the Section 811 Supported Housing for Persons With Disabilities Program; \$1,250,320 of Facilities Consolidation Funds (FCF); and \$226,170 from the Housing Stabilization Fund. The award includes additional funding of \$181,150 over five years to support the operation of the site once it is occupied.

The Vernon Street project was initiated in 1996 by Greater Framingham families involved in the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI Greater Framingham), who approached Framingham-based Advocates, Inc. with the idea of developing a supported housing site in Framingham similar to one that Advocates had introduced in Marlborough earlier that year.

Their Community

"These were Greater Framingham residents, whose family members had grown up locally" says William J. Taylor, Advocates' president and CEO. "Their strongest wish was for their family members to be able to continue to live in their own community."

During the intervening years, more than 50 community members joined Advocates, family members and clients in planning a model that would allow individuals to live in their own apartments but with support and companionship

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nearby. The project planners included Greater Framingham residents, local and state officials, and members of the Greater Framingham business community.

According to Taylor, several sites and funding sources were considered, but the planning group experienced difficulty securing site control and funding simultaneously. All of the pieces finally fell in to place in 2004 when the Vernon Street property, a non-profit rest home for several decades, became available. Advocates received notice in January 2006 that HUD would fund the project.

Local support

In 2005 the Vernon Street proposal received unanimous support from the Framingham Board of Selectmen and approval from the Massachusetts Historical Commission. In May of 2006, the Framingham District Historic Commission also voted unanimously to support the project.

“The Vernon Street site will offer permanent, affordable housing with support to eight individuals in recovery from mental illness,” said Taylor. “These residents will have had successful community living experience, likely with support from an organization like Advocates. Their new living arrangement will offer them a home in which they can have both privacy and a sense of community.

“A resident manager will live in a ninth apartment, and will provide education, support and skills training on a schedule determined by the needs of the residents. That schedule will be supplemented by Greater Framingham-based outreach workers as needed.

“Although each individual will have his or her own apartment, there will also be community space designed so residents can get together to socialize, learn new skills, and enjoy living among friends.

“Vernon Street is an ideal location,” says Taylor. “It is near public transportation, shops, employment opportunities and access to services.”

‘Paradoxical’

Taylor noted that the \$2.6 project is “paradoxical” in light of the recent national financial downturn and potential budget reductions in response to anticipated state funding cuts.

“The HUD dollars were awarded in what is now the distant past,” he explained. “They are restricted by law to be used to renovate the Vernon Street property and cannot be used for any other purpose.”

More than 100 guests including local, state and federal representatives and scores of individuals involved in the project over the past 12 years have been invited to the 3 – 5 p.m. groundbreaking ceremony on November 12. The public

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is welcome to attend, and can contact hriward@advocatesinc.org for more information about the event.

General contractor for Advocates' Vernon Street project is Brian Shorten of Shorten Construction. The residences, designed by architect Ed Clinton of Clinton Designs, are expected to be ready for occupancy by Fall 2009.

Advocates, Inc. is among the 20 largest Massachusetts human service organizations and is a leading provider of outpatient mental health and substance abuse services; community education; job training and support; housing and benefits; advocacy services, and intensive home-based intervention for individuals and families. Advocates provides residential, vocational, respite and psychiatric emergency services in more than one hundred sites in Eastern Massachusetts.

Additional information about Advocates can be found at www.AdvocatesInc.org.

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