



## New London Homeless Hospitality Center

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### New housing opening for homeless vets

*In New London, veterans have a temporary home while working to improve their lives*

By Jennifer McDermott Day Staff Writer

**New London, CT** - Ben Simon hung a dream catcher in his new living room inside a house for homeless veterans. His dream is to get back into the culinary field and find his own place.

Simon, 56, is one of the eight homeless veterans who will live at Project Home while they navigate government programs, find work and look for more permanent housing.

The New London Homeless Hospitality Center used a grant from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs to purchase a four-family house at 51-53 Mountain Ave. Transitional housing for veterans is available elsewhere in the state, including in the Hartford and Bridgeport areas, but not locally.

*"To me, this is a stepping stone to where I've got to go. Someone else might need this bed," Simon said Wednesday. "I'm going to be a success ..."*

The VA grant covers 65 percent of the project cost, which was about \$200,000 to buy and renovate the building. The center needed to raise the rest through donations, and the

department would provide an ongoing grant to help operate the building and offer support services to the veterans.

The center still needs \$15,000 in donations to repay the loan it took to complete the renovations rather than delay the opening while fundraising.

Catherine Zall, executive director of the hospitality center, said it has been uplifting to see how the community, especially veterans' organizations, have supported the project.

The center officially opens the home on Friday, but veterans have already started to move in to the four two-bedroom apartments.

Simon said he feels special - and thankful - to be a part of it.

"When you've got your own keys and your own money, you're all right," he said.

Simon's front door opens into the living room, with its large windows and a window fan, wooden chairs and side tables, and a blue and white sofa that faces a television surrounded by a collection of DVDs. He's hung a bright abstract painting in the corner.

A narrow hallway leads past the two bedrooms - each with a bed and dresser, and the bathroom with a new shower curtain and towels - to the kitchen. Simon passed through the kitchen to the back deck and sat on one of the wooden benches.

A lawn mower was padlocked to the deck's railing. "We're in the 'hood," Simon explained. "You've got to lock things up around here."

Mountain Avenue residents routinely appear in the police logs for drugs, assault and other crimes. In early 2008, a man was shot multiple times on nearby Jay Street and shots were fired at the corner of Mountain Avenue and Manwaring Street.

The potential for crime is the one thing that bothers Simon about his new home. Zall said the neighborhood is "improving," but "it's obvious there are still issues."

"It's a trade-off," she said, since the center was able to get a good price on a "solid building" that is near the center and medical services for veterans.

Four veterans have been chosen to move in. Six more are interested, and Zall and her staff will choose the last four soon.

The aim is to help veterans who need extra support before living on their own, such as veterans who are

struggling with a mental health or substance abuse issue or who have been unemployed for a long time. Veterans can stay for up to two years but the goal is to get them into their own apartments quickly and help about a dozen veterans annually.

"It took us three years to get this grant," Zall said. "The military is a big part of our life here, with the Naval Submarine Base and Electric Boat. I think this is something we should have, and we should recognize our veterans."

Originally from Washington, D.C., Simon served on Navy surface ships from 1976 to 1988. He spent most of his adult life working in the culinary field, and he moved to New London about four years ago to be closer to his son, who serves in the Connecticut

National Guard and is on his second tour in Afghanistan. One of his daughters is in Iraq with the Navy.

Simon lost his job cooking in a local restaurant about a year ago, then moved out of his home when his relationship with his girlfriend ended. He began staying at local shelters.

He now works nights at the distribution center for Bob's Discount Furniture in Taftville and plans to apply for veterans benefits through the VA. Zall stopped by to drop off two quilts that were donated for the apartment. She complimented Simon on his choice of wall decor.

Looking up at the dream catcher, she said, "We should have them all over the place."