

From blighted North Philly school to homeless veteran housing: A historic building is transformed

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The former Spring Garden School No. 1 closed in 1982, but it has found new life as housing for homeless veterans and low-income senior citizens.

When Philadelphia school officials decided to vacate the Spring Garden School at 12th and Ogden Streets in 1982 and move its occupants just a few blocks south to the empty Oliver P. Corman school on Melon Street, they aimed to pull teachers and students out of one of the city's meanest turfs.

At the time, the Richard Allen Homes public housing project that flanked Spring Garden School No. 1 had been overtaken by worsening blight and mounting drugs and crime. Things were so bad that strangers would walk into school, "snatch a coat, walk out, and say, 'I dare you to come after me,'" George DiPilato, a school district official, told the Inquirer at the time.

By moving pupils and employees into a new building, officials had hoped to give the school's attendees the fresh start they needed.

Nearly 40 years later, the old school building itself is finally getting the same chance.

After decades of sitting vacant and blighted in the center of this North Philadelphia neighborhood, the former Spring Garden School No. 1, at 845 N. 12th St., finally has a new purpose: housing for Philadelphia's homeless veterans and low-income seniors. And a new name: the Lural Lee Blevins Veterans Center and HELP Philadelphia V.



Photo Gallery: From blighted North Philly school to homeless veteran housing: A historic building is transformed

The redevelopment of the building, which was added to the National Historic Register in the 1980s, is being spearheaded by Help USA, a New York-based nonprofit that helps provide homes, jobs and services to America's homeless. After breaking ground in August 2016, the building, named for a North Philadelphia man who died in the Vietnam War, opened to tenants in the fall and finished leasing its 37 units in early December. Twelve of the building's units are designated for homeless veterans, while the remaining 25 house low-income residents 55 and older.

"We started moving people in during November, and we are completely full now," said David Cleghorn, chief housing officer for Help USA. "... We had a lot of demand and, unfortunately, only 37 units."

According to Cleghorn, Help USA received 213 applications for the 37 units. The organization has stopped taking applications for now.

The switch from a graffiti-marred school building to redeveloped apartments is a big step forward for the property and the surrounding neighborhood. In recent years, the West Poplar neighborhood — defined as the swath between Broad and Ninth Streets, and Spring Garden Street and Girard Avenue — has experienced steady change, as developers have taken on projects as small as new housing units and as gargantuan as [Eric Blumenfeld's Divine Lorraine renovation](#). Yet even amid such progress, the old Spring Garden school — designed by prominent architect Irwin T. Catharine and built in 1928 — sat, seemingly frozen in time. Only trespassers and drug users, observers say, typically used the building.



Now, residents traverse each day the same halls and floors that students walked decades ago. Just this month, they joined together for holiday celebrations. On the ground floor, Public Health Management Corp., a Philadelphia-based nonprofit, will offer support services, Cleghorn said.

“They will be working with the [formerly homeless] residents, making sure they are getting proper health care, connecting them with resources in the community, making sure they pay their rent on the first of every month,” Cleghorn said. “Their role is, ‘How do we keep this man or woman housed here?’ ... It really is individualized, depending on what that resident needs.”

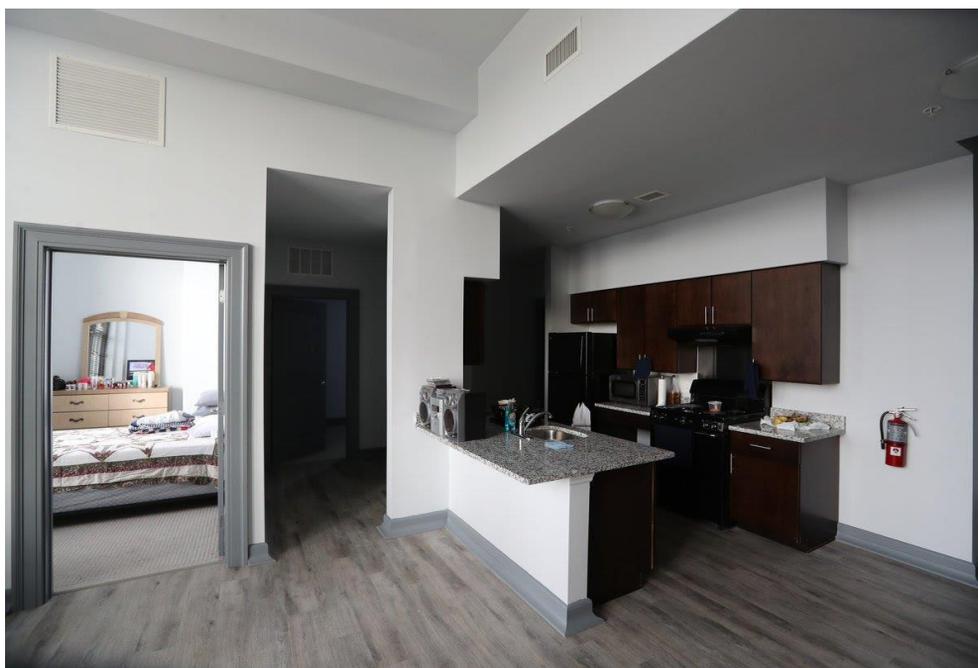


The opening of Help USA’s new housing facility comes at a time when more public attention has been focused on services for homeless veterans. In 2010, the Obama administration set the goal of ending homelessness among veterans by the end of 2015. According to January 2017 estimates from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, nearly 40,000 veterans were homeless nationwide, a roughly 47 percent reduction since 2009.

Part of that reduction has been attributed to a federal program called HUD-VASH, run by HUD and the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, which sets aside federal money for a voucher program that helps provide permanent housing and case management for the country’s most vulnerable veterans. [The program gained widespread attention earlier this month when it appeared that the Trump administration planned to eliminate it.](#) The plans to ax the program have since been reversed.

When federal money does not go far enough, organizations such as Help USA can help fill in the gaps, Cleghorn said. The organization, founded by New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo, provides emergency shelter and transitional and permanent housing, along with social services to America’s homeless population, including veterans.

Help USA has developed or is currently developing 21 permanent housing sites for the homeless in five states, 11 of which have units set aside for veterans. The redevelopment of the former Spring Garden School No. 1 — a \$14 million project — is the fifth housing project that Help USA has completed in Pennsylvania. To complete the redevelopment, the organization relied on low-income and historic tax credits, as well as funding from private philanthropy and foundations, and a \$500,000 mortgage to plug the funding gap.



“These projects are worthwhile, important for the economy, important for neighborhoods, and important for the people that live in them,” Cleghorn said. “... It’s important that people understand they are not handouts to people. They create a lot of jobs. They create a lot of clean and affordable housing for people that deserve it.”

“... We have a building that was not in use that is no longer a blight on the community,” he continued.

To qualify for the housing, seniors living in the low-income portion of building must make 50 percent or less of Philadelphia’s area median income — which is \$29,500 for a single person. Homeless veterans must pay 30 percent of their income to their rent. The rest of the monthly payments are subsidized with Section 8 rental vouchers.

The building, which was named for Lural Lee Blevins III, a North Philadelphia resident who died in the Vietnam War, is owned by the Philadelphia Housing Authority, though Help USA has a 99-year lease. It contains 27 one-bedroom units and 10 two-bedroom units, all of which were created from the school’s classrooms. All units were outfitted with granite countertops, and the school’s original floors and marble wainscoting in the public hallways were preserved. Each of the 12 homeless veteran units is equipped with furniture provided by Help USA, as well as toiletries and appliances, courtesy of a \$20,000 private donation.

“We gave them paper products, coffeemakers, toasters and silverware,” Cleghorn said. “So when somebody is moving in right from the shelter, there is nothing they need to go buy.”

“... You want to provide opportunity for [the homeless] to assimilate and live with the larger community as a whole,” he continued.

With the Spring Garden School renovation complete, Cleghorn said, Help USA would focus its attention on its next project: Redeveloping the Gen. John F. Reynolds school in Sharswood. Help USA plans to provide 56 low-income and homeless veteran units at the site, contingent upon whether it receives tax credits for the project in the spring.

