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State and local housing advocates broke ground Tuesday on 37 new supportive housing apartments and a housing resource center in Pittsfield

By Claire O'Callahan, The Berkshire Eagle
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PITTSFIELD — For years, shelters have provided people a roof above their heads and a mattress to sleep on for the night. Come morning, they return to the streets before seeking shelter again when the sun sets.

It's a cycle housing advocates and the Executive Office of Housing and Livable Communities want to break.

“Shelter is a stop along the way sometimes, but it’s not an end goal. The end goal is a home,” Secretary of Housing Ed Augustus said Tuesday at a groundbreaking for supportive housing apartments in Pittsfield. “That’s where you get the chance to take care of your physical and mental health and get your life together and move to a better place.”

Augustus joined local and state housing advocates at Zion Lutheran Church on Tuesday morning, to celebrate the groundbreaking of 37 new permanent supportive apartments and a housing resource center. The three projects, at a

total cost of \$16 million, are the product of a wide-reaching partnership between local and state housing advocates, faith communities, the city of Pittsfield and the Executive Office of Housing and Livable Communities.

Once complete, the projects will provide long-term housing and supportive resources for some of the city's most vulnerable residents – those experiencing homelessness.

“Today is a good day. Today we celebrate our community's commitment and responsibility to our neighbors, especially those who are unhoused, living in shelter or outside,” said Eileen Peltier, CEO of housing nonprofit Hearthway, which is developing the projects. “Today, Pittsfield is taking a big step toward our responsibility to make our community stronger for all of us.”

As housing costs rise across the commonwealth, more people are experiencing housing insecurity and homelessness. In Western Massachusetts alone, the number of people experiencing homelessness rose by 16.9 percent between January 2023 and January 2024.

But in Pittsfield, people have limited places to turn to. The Pearl, which provides up to six months of shelter, is usually at capacity, as are ServiceNet's apartments offering temporary shelter to families.

Hearthway has designed the 37 new apartments and housing resource center to augment those existing supports.

The units — nine at Zion Lutheran Church and 28 on West Housatonic Street — will serve those who have found themselves without a home because of rising costs, mental illness, substance use disorder or other factors.

Unlike more traditional forms of shelter, the units will be permanent, meaning that residents can stay as long as they would like, as long as they abide by the lease agreement.

Each apartment will also be paired with optional supportive services that residents can access as they navigate any other challenges they may be grappling with.

“We know [supportive housing] is essential to making sure that folks who’ve experienced homelessness will actually be able to stay successfully rehoused. It’s not just about giving them the unit, keys and luck, but it’s providing them supports,” Augustus said.

One of those supports will be the new housing resource center, at Zion Lutheran Church, which will offer a day space where both residents of the apartments and others can sit down, charge their phone, shower, meet with a case worker and eat a meal.

“I think in some ways the housing resource center is like a front door,” Augustus said. “That can be the first stop where [people] can get essentials taken care of like doing some laundry and getting a shower, but also access other things they need to become successfully housed.”

It’s a model Augustus said he hopes to see replicated across the commonwealth. The [Affordable Homes Act](#), signed into law in August, provides \$70 million in funding for supportive housing development.

On Tuesday morning, speakers traced the projects’ roots back to the pandemic, when the number of people experiencing homelessness rose sharply and an encampment grew at Springside Park.

“It was a lot of people without shelter, without access to food, without access to a shower, without access to all the wraparound services that our vulnerable neighbors need most,” former Pittsfield Mayor Linda Tyer said at the groundbreaking.

When the city received funds from the American Rescue Plan Act, Tyer directed part of that money to housing. Those funds supported the construction of The Pearl and now, the Housing Resource Center.

After the pandemic, interest in expanding housing resources for people experiencing homelessness dovetailed with conversations at Zion Lutheran Church.

As the congregation has grown smaller over the decades, congregants began to search for a new use for their empty second floor and basement.

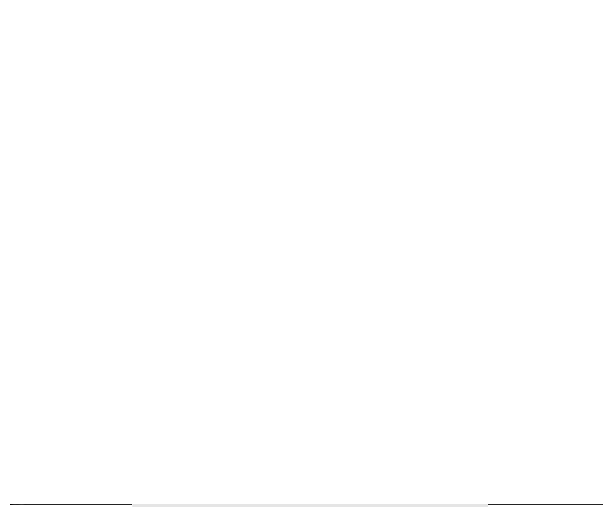
They tossed around various ideas: a school, an art gallery, a coworking space. When Pastor Joel Bergeland joined the congregation in 2021, he picked up the project.

“My first six or seven months here was cold calling people and saying, 'Hey, I'm new in town. I'm the new pastor, and do you need a building?'" he recalled.

Among the people who picked up the phone was Peltier.

Now, with construction underway, Bergeland said the project feels in keeping with the space. People were already coming to the church to sleep in the shelter of its south entry.

“They were coming to the right place. They were coming to the right door. They were looking for shelter and basic needs — the very things that will be offered in this building,” he said. “They were just a little bit early. They knew, perhaps before we all did, that this place held the potential to be what we are making it now.”



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