

Howard Housing Commission contracts VOA to help homeless

By **Luke Lavoie**, llavoie@tribune.com

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The Howard County Housing Commission has contracted Volunteers of America Chesapeake to provide clinical case management services to approximately 33 households receiving rental assistance through the agency.

The arrangement is expected to be the first step in expanding the faith-based human services organization's presence in the county.

The \$173,589 contract was funded by a mix of federal grants provided through the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, as well as county matching funds. It is to pay for a range of services to assist people in Howard County who are disabled and recovering from homelessness.

"It is a program that is structured around homelessness status and disability status," said Shirelle Bennett, deputy director of the Housing Commission.

The program will serve residents receiving rental assistance via housing subsidies through the commission. Bennett said Volunteers of America will be providing a services, including individual counseling, regular checkups to ensure the people remain stable in their housing, connecting individuals with other support agencies, developing individual emergency plans, and advocacy efforts.

While the program has been in existence for years, this year marks the first time Volunteers of America has been contracted to provide the service in Howard County.

"We had been looking for an opportunity to expand our programs into Howard," said Jack Hollerbach, executive vice president and chief financial officer of Volunteers of America Chesapeake. "It's a natural continuous expansion for us. ... It was right in our ballpark."

The organization, which is a local branch of the national Volunteers of America, provides assistance to the homeless and to those suffering from physical disabilities and mental illnesses.

Hollerbach, who lives in Ellicott City, said the organization has focused on more densely populated areas of the region – such as Baltimore City and Prince George's County – where homelessness and mental illness are more prevalent.

Hollerbach went on to say, however, that homelessness — which can be related to some form of physical or mental disability — is a reality in Howard County, even though the county is regarded as being among the 10 most wealthy in the U.S.

"We go to high-end stores and eat at nice restaurants, so it's easy to overlook those folks," Hollerbach said.

A point-in-time survey conducted in January 2013 found 203 homeless people in Howard County, which included 65 living unsheltered. A similar survey in 2012 counted 230 homeless, including 82 living outside shelters.

Hollerbach touted the county's existing support services for the homeless, which includes Grassroots Crisis Intervention Center. The county's support for the homeless is provided by the Housing Commission and the county's Department of Citizen Services.

He added that Volunteers of America hopes to improve on the existing homeless support services offered in Howard

County.

"We are going to bring a different level of services to them that the organization currently in the county. ... don't have the expertise in offering," Hollerbach said. "We can supplement the good work being done by others."

Bennett said Volunteers of America was selected through a competitive process, and the organization was the highest rated applicant.

"VOA has a fairly strong track record," Bennett, said. "They have extensive experience particularly with the population we are serving. ... Their experience really set them apart from the other providers."

In addition to the contract, Volunteers of America is also involved in the county's plan to open a homeless day shelter on two acres and make available 30 efficiency apartments near the intersection of Routes 1 and 32. Plans for the shelter, which straddles the communities of Savage and Jessup, were announced in May 2013 and the county has allocated \$3.25 million to purchase the land for the facility. Construction is expected to begin later this year.

Another organization will run the day center, and Volunteers of America is in discussions with the county to develop the apartment part of the project.

Hollerbach said he hopes the contract will lead to additional opportunities for the organization in Howard County.

"We know that [County Executive] Ken Ulman and his team are looking at other ways to help [the homeless], and we hope this will be an opening," Hollerbach said.

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