



Robin's Home: A haven for homeless female veterans in Butler

June 13, 2019 7:00 AM

By Sandy Trozzo

The unassuming house at 401 Pearl St. in Butler looks much like its neighbors: three stories high and built circa 1900s. But this house is being transformed into a much-needed resource, thanks to the vision of one veteran.

Army veteran Mary Chitwood, of Butler, conceived the idea for Robin's Home for women veterans and their children two years ago.

"We need housing for female veterans because a lot have children, and there is no place to house them," she said.

In a 2017 report to Congress, the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development said that females were the fastest growing segment of homeless veterans, said Lyndsay Burrik, executive for wellness and recovery for Southwestern Pennsylvania Human Services Inc.

Catholic Charities in Butler identified 30 local female veterans with unstable housing between 2015 and 2018. And the American Psychological Association reports that nearly 25 percent of homeless female veterans experienced post-traumatic stress disorder that was not related to combat situations.

It is those veterans that Ms. Chitwood wants to help. The home is named for her friend, Robin Arnold, an Army veteran who served with Operation Desert Storm. Ms. Chitwood said Ms. Arnold suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder and the effects of military sexual trauma. She died in January 2017 following complications from surgery.

Ms. Chitwood's first steps were to put together a business plan and partner with the human services group.

She found the house on Pearl Street and, with the help of local businesses, is making it into a home. Car dealer Dennis Baglier purchased the house for \$48,000. Contractor Bill Kennihan donated a new heating and air conditioning system worth about \$30,000, and several of his employees installed it on a recent Saturday.

Using the home for transitional housing got special exception approval of the Butler zoning hearing board in March, despite some neighbors' concerns that the house would lower property values.

"We had to show that we would not be a danger to the community," Ms. Chitwood recalled.

Ms. Chitwood and a friend, Wendy Beeching, a social worker, conducted what she called a "grassroots effort to raise money" — about \$30,000 so far — to finish what needed to be done in the house, including items such as 14 new windows and hookup to a new sewer line.

Three American Legion posts, as well as the Butler Legion Riders, donated money. Other local businesses and residents donated furniture and equipment, or sold it at a deep discount. A group of student volunteers from Slippery Rock University are helping with cleanup and a marketing campaign and are developing a website.

Robin's Home will hold eight women and will be ready for occupancy in July. Services include peer support, case management, legal referrals, financial literacy, disability claims, child services referrals and workforce development. It will be staffed by volunteers, Ms. Chitwood said.

Any Butler County female veteran who is homeless or "unstably housed," such as sleeping on a friend's couch, is eligible to move into Robin's Home, Ms. Chitwood said. Referrals will come from Catholic Charities and the Butler Veterans Affairs office.

The VA, Ms. Beeching said, "can't wait until we have our doors open. A lot of times, women stay in dangerous situations" such as an abusive boyfriend in order to have somewhere to live."

Once the women move in, they will get case management services "to determine what caused the housing crisis," Ms. Chitwood said. They will be referred to the VA or other agencies in the

community for whatever services they need, such as peer support or a social worker.

“Military sexual trauma is going to be something we will be dealing with,” Ms. Chitwood said.

Ms. Beeching said that women veterans “are perceived differently if they have difficulties. It is one thing for a man to have mental difficulties and not be a good dad. ... There is extra judgment if a woman is not a good parent because of trauma.”

Ms. Chitwood added that female veterans also do not receive the same respect as their male counterparts. Although she is on the executive board of her American Legion Post 778, many thought she was with the ladies’ auxiliary.

Ms. Chitwood, a single mother, has a diverse background in social work and a master’s degree in criminal justice administration. She recalled being at risk of being homeless last year after losing her job. “Just because someone’s homeless, it doesn’t have to be because of drug and alcohol problems,” she noted.

More information and how to help Robin’s Home can be found on its website:
www.robinshome.us or call 724-453-4644.

Sandy Trozzo, freelance writer: suburbanliving@post-gazette.com.