

Mayor's Challenge helps vets find home

Durham has housed 305 formerly homeless veterans since signing the national challenge in 2014.

By Olivia Browning
The Durham VOICE

Larry Sims, 56, served in the military for 10 years. He also knows what it's like to not have a place to call home.

"I was unemployed and didn't know anything about the area," Sims said. "I stayed everywhere from the Durham Rescue Mission, to shelters — even at a bus stop."

Sims is one of the 23 veterans residing in the Denson Apartments. He now washes linens for a hospital as part of the Compensated Work Therapy program offered by Veterans Affairs.

"It's a six-month training program that helps veterans get acclimated to the work force," Sims said. "I think living here made it easier for me to get the job."

The Denson Apartments provide housing for homeless veterans living with disabilities. Located at 1598 Sedgefield St., the apartments are managed by CASA, an affordable housing developer and property manager.

CASA is a Raleigh-based nonprofit that manages over 400 apartments across 56 properties for individuals and families in Wake, Durham and Orange counties.

Missy Hatley, resource development director for CASA, said nearly 25 percent of CASA's apartments belong to a veteran household.

"We accept housing vouchers, which is typically a big barrier for veterans," she said. "And we are specifically looking to serve that market."

In November 2014, CASA opened 11 units of permanent supportive housing for Durham veterans. The second phase of the project was completed in September 2016 for \$1.5 million with funding from the City of Durham, the Home Depot Foundation and private donations. The completion of Phase II allowed 12 formerly homeless veterans to move into one-bed, one-bath apartments in October.

The City of Durham funded \$1.16 million as part of the Mayor's Challenge to End Homelessness in Durham — an initiative started by the Obama administration in June 2014.



Veterans celebrate the September opening of Denson Apartments. One month later, 12 formerly homeless veterans moved into the building.

After a two-year effort led by Mayor William Bell, the city was recognized for ending chronic veteran homelessness at a September ribbon-cutting ceremony for Phase II of the Denson Apartments. According to a city press release, Durham housed 305 formerly homeless veterans through collaborative efforts from the Durham VA Medical Center, Durham Housing Authority, City's Community Development Department and Durham County.

"The Mayor's Challenge is good proof that you can make a difference and end veteran homelessness, or at least come close," Kim Westermann, CASA's communications manager said. "I'm glad they took it so seriously."

CASA is celebrating its 25th anniversary this year. Westermann said in honor of its anniversary, the non-profit is planning to build another 100 apartments in the Triangle area by next year.

"The majority of the apartments that we have are in Wake County, but we would love to expand in Durham," Westermann said. "We know the need is here."

Andre Byrd was one of the 12 veterans who moved into the Denson Apartments in October. He was born at Duke Hospital, only a few miles away from his new apartment.

Byrd joined the Army in 1977 and fractured his right foot after only a few months

of training. He decided not to tell anyone about his foot because he didn't want to go on sick call and have to start training all over again.

Byrd eventually went to a doctor to get prosthetics for his shoes. But when they wore out, he couldn't afford to replace them.

After about seven years in the military, Byrd worked in a paper warehouse and in hospitality jobs.

"My foot started to hurt again," he said. "One day I woke up and couldn't get out of bed."

Byrd stopped working because of the pain. He said it took three years to be assigned a doctor at the VA.

"I've had my share of struggles," Byrd said. "I had to call on every friend and every family member in the area to help me out."

Byrd lived in transitional housing for 18 months while he waited for Phase II of the Denson Apartments to be completed. He is happy with his new apartment, but said he hopes the government changes the way it handles veterans.

"You put your life on the line for this country and people seem to forget it," he said. "They don't think about you once you're done — they go on with their lives while you're out there risking yours."