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serving people who serve people

Westhab**Building Communities. Changing Lives.***by Fred Scaglione*

Westhab was founded in 1981 by a group of real estate developers who wanted to create affordable housing for poor people living in Westchester County. They soon learned that it would take more than reasonable rents and attractive buildings to solve Westchester's rapidly growing housing and homelessness crisis. Over the next 30 years, under the leadership of President/CEO Bob Miller, Westhab would become Westchester's leading provider of affordable housing as well as housing and services for the homeless. The agency built an extensive social services program, initially based in its shelters but then expanding into free-standing community centers in Yonkers and Mount Vernon. It adopted a community development focus, offering youth development as well as education, employment and housing services for adults in Westchester's inner cities.

As a result, during its history, Westhab has moved more than 6,000 families from homelessness to affordable housing and placed 4,000 individuals receiving public assistance into employment. And, in line with its original mission, it has created over 2,000 units of permanent affordable housing serving both low-income Westchester County residents as well as an increasing number of special needs populations such as seniors, disabled veterans, returning offenders and youth.

This month, Westhab begins a major transition as Miller retires and passes leadership of the organization on to Richard Nightingale, who has been with the agency since 2001, most recently serving as Vice President of Youth and Family Services. This carefully planned succession is just one of the significant changes which Westhab has been undertaking in recent years as it expands and fine tunes its services to meet evolving needs.

In the Beginning

"I came in 1984 when the agency was just undertaking its first project," says Miller who had previously served as Director of Housing for the Westchester County Department of Social Services. Westhab had acquired a vacant 72-room single-room-occupancy (SRO) hotel in Yonkers. "We put together nine different sources of financing," says Miller. "In what was then an unusual mixed occupancy model, we set aside some rooms for homeless individuals. The County paid us \$30 a day for those services and we were able to use that income to subsidize affordable rents for permanent residents."

While Westhab's initial focus was on creating permanent affordable housing, it was soon called upon to help with Westchester's exploding homelessness crisis.

"In 1983, the Partnership for the Homeless succeeded in its lawsuit against New York City and New York State Department of Social Services changed its regulations and required local counties to provide shelter for anyone who needed it," says Miller. "Westchester County's homelessness problem went from what was a relative handful of single men and increased geometrically. In 1983, the County's budget for shelters was around \$750,000. A year later, it was \$6 million; then \$12 million and up to \$40 million a year. At its height, in the early 1990s, the

County was sheltering 1,000 homeless families and 1,500 single adults."

Westhab began scrambling to keep up, says Miller. "We started buying vacant buildings and getting bank loans to do renovations for a mix of transitional and permanent housing. When we couldn't bring on enough buildings, we started leasing individual apartments. That became the start of our scattered-site apartment program."

Meanwhile, however, the County was being forced to place homeless families wherever it could find space, often in un-staffed hotels and motels. "By the late 1980s and early 1990s, there were hundreds of families housed in motels, sometimes far from the County," says Miller. "There were newspaper investigative reports about families having to send their kids back and forth to school every day from motels in Poughkeepsie." Inside the County, there were dozens of small motels 100% occupied by homeless families.

"The County asked us to lease some of these hotels, renovate them and operate them as real family shelters," says Miller. "In 1989, Westhab acquired the Vernon Plaza Hotel and turned it into a 35-family shelter. In 1991, we leased the Howard Johnson, a 100-room motel in Elmsford. In 1992 we took over the Kings Inn motel in Greenberg and made it a 66-person shelter. In '93 we acquired the Coachman Inn in White Plains and created a 100-family shelter. By 1993, we were operating four large shelters and hundreds of scattered-site apartments."

The Westhab shelters were a far cry from the un-staffed motels that they had replaced. "We built up a significant social service program to support families," says Miller.

Throughout the 1990s and into the new millennium, Westhab continued to focus on providing shelter and services for Westchester families. In the early 2000s, however, Westchester – unlike New York City which was experiencing a dramatic rise in family homelessness – actually began to see the number of homeless begin to decline.

"There had been about 1,000 families in shelter in the 1990s," says Miller. "Today, there are about 300."

The agency utilizes an adaption of the "housing first" model – and a continuum of structured services – designed to move families into permanent housing as quickly as possible.

"Housing First views permanent housing as the starting point in the process, not the end result and dictates that families should be placed in housing as soon as safely and appropriately possible with strong follow-up services to address longer term needs," says Miller.

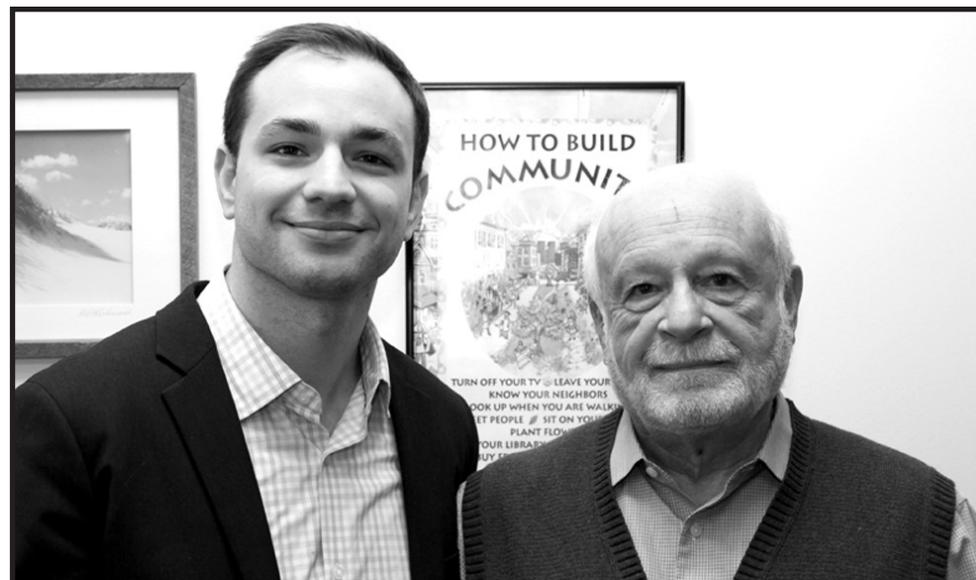
"We place about 300 families in permanent housing every year," says Nightingale. "That's essentially a 100% placement rate every year."

Housing First

Families are initially referred to Westhab's Coachman Family Center in White Plains. "We offer a full range of social services," says Ricardo Torres, Director of Family Services. Westhab's Rapid Re-Housing Department conducts a series of assessments to determine a family's needs and challenges. "We have a LMSW Assessment Coordinator, a team of Case Managers, a Housing Specialist, an Employment Counselor and a full Youth Services Department." Outside providers come onsite to provide medical and mental health services, substance abuse screenings, and more.

"Families come to us with many different needs," says Assessment Coordinator Ramona Parker.

"We identify any barriers to employment – skills and educational issues, child care needs, clothing, transportation problems, even immigration status and legal issues," says Employment Counselor Shanita Francis. "Then we come up



Richard Nightingale and Bob Miller

with an Individual Employment Plan (IEP) on how we are going to address each issue. Sometimes the first step may not be employment. It could be getting legal documents, obtaining a GED or improving vocational skills. We provide a workshop series here on soft skills – business etiquette, how to dress and behave for an interview, etc."

Between 150 and 200 school age children participate in the Coachman's robust, on-site Youth Services program.

"In the course of the week, we may have as many as 30 different programs for young people," says Nightingale.

"We have homework help every day," says Youth Services Coordinator Ivan Smith. "Three days per week Southern Westchester BOCES teachers come in to teach reading and work with

the children. We also get tutoring volunteers from Manhattanville College and other organizations. We never schedule any other activities until homework time is over."

Once the academics are out of the way, however, there is plenty of enrichment and recreation – including exposure to a variety of arts and culture. "Four days per week we bring kids to Manhattanville College for mentoring. There is a theater program on Saturday," says Smith. "We work with Arts-Westchester which sends artists-in-residency here to teach our kids music, dance and visual arts. Every year, the Westchester Symphony Orchestra comes for four weeks and teaches our kids how to play an instrument and read music. It culminates in a concert."

"The kids really get pretty good in just four weeks," says Torres.

"There is a lot going on here," says Smith. "We have kids who ask if they can come back when they are leaving because they miss all the services and activities we offer."

The average stay in the Coachman is only two months. While approximately 10% of families may stay longer due to child safety concerns or other issues, 30% are placed directly into permanent housing. More than half – around 60% – are fast-tracked into Westhab's transitional Emergency Housing Apartment Program (EHAP) to continue their path towards permanent housing.

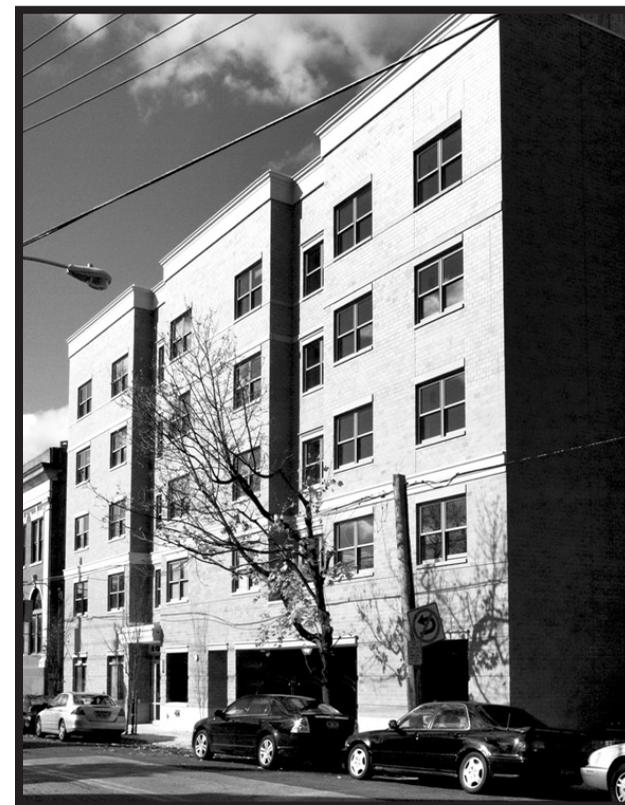
EHAP

Westhab's 210 scattered site EHAP apartments offer homeless families an opportunity to live independently – but with all the social service supports they get at the Coachman. "Families get the same exact services as here," says

Torres. "The program has its own Case Managers, Housing Specialists and Employment Counselors." One advantage, however, is that it allows families to live in or closer to their home communities. "That can make it easier to find a job and find an apartment," he explains. EHAP is treated as a stepping stone to permanent housing and an aggressive affordable housing search continues throughout each family's residency in the hopes of moving each family to permanent housing as quickly as possible.

Rental Subsidy

One key to Westhab's success in moving families out of shelter and back into permanent housing is its Rapid Re-Housing Rental Assistance Subsidies.



41 Clinton Place, an attractive 25-unit affordable housing development in New Rochelle, was completed in 2008.

"We created these rent subsidies about five years ago," says Nightingale, who describes the program as targeted and purposefully "shallow". "We can give families \$200, \$300, \$400 or more each month for a couple of years, just enough extra to help them find an affordable apartment. We try to keep it low so that when it ends, the family will realistically will be able to pay that extra amount themselves."

"I've seen other programs where they pay the entire rental," says Torres. "That sets families up to fail when the subsidy ends."

He explains that even a small amount of extra support can make a huge difference when a family

in shelter is looking for permanent housing. “A family of two would qualify for a Department of Social Service rental allowance of \$728,” says Torres. “It’s hard to find an apartment for that amount. If we can add \$150 or \$200, now their options have expanded.”

Westhab can provide its rent subsidies to more than 100 families at any given time. Funding it has been – and continues to be – a challenge. “It started with Homeless Prevention and Re-Housing Program (HPRP) – a big federal stimulus program,” says Miller. “When HPRP went away, we hustled and found other sources – federal, state and county.” These include federal McKinney funding through the Westchester Continuum of Care and Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) funding through the City of Yonkers. There is also the State’s Solutions to End Homelessness Program, although that is schedule to end later this year. “We’re constantly replacing one funding stream with another,” says Miller.

Housing Retention

Westhab also works hard to make sure that homeless families successfully keep their permanent housing once they find it. A staff of three Housing Retention Specialists works with families for up to a year after they leave shelter. “They help them get settled and make sure they are connected to resources in the community,” says Torres. “They will assist them with any difficulties that might arise that could lead them to lose their housing.”

The Housing Retention Specialists are available to any families leaving shelter, but are mandatory for those receiving Westhab’s rental subsidies.

Beyond Homelessness

As Westchester’s homelessness crisis began to abate in the early 2000s, Westhab made a proactive decision to refocus on its affordable housing mission while also expanding its range of services to support a broader community development mandate. “We proudly closed two of our shelters, have been able to ‘repurpose’ one as affordable housing, and refocused our efforts on community development as part of a broad strategic initiative,” says Nightingale.

“We realized that due to the quality of life issues in some of these neighborhoods, just doing quality affordable housing wasn’t sufficient,” says Miller. “We needed to be about community development.” Westhab began developing Community Centers in Yonkers and Mt. Vernon. “We started getting grants to hire advocates, community organizers and counselors. We brought in other agencies to do family counseling and mental health services. We opened food pantries.”

The programs also included extensive youth services and a strong employment services program.

Youth Services

“We had been working with young people in the shelters for years and had seen 17-year-old girls who had been in the shelters as children return with children of their own,” says Miller. “We knew that we had to do something to get families out of this cycle of homelessness. We took our programs from the shelter and brought them out into the community.”

In 2006, Westhab opened its first community-based program, the Elm Street Youth Center in Yonkers. Two years later, it established the Promoting Excellence & Achievement in Kids (PEAK) Center in Mt. Vernon. Subsequently, the agency added Achieve, an academic and employment assistance program for out-of-school young adults in Mount Vernon and on-site after-school programs for resident youth at Yonkers Municipal Housing sites.

Two years ago, Westhab took a significant

strategic step when it expanded beyond Westchester and won contracts for two NYC Out-of-School Time (OST) programs in the Bronx. Westhab’s Our Lady of Grace Center in Bronxwood serves middle school students and the Hunts Point Parks & Recreation Center serves elementary aged students in the southeast Bronx. Westhab is now adding an additional OST program in the Bronx at the Hyde Leadership Charter School, just a few blocks from the Hunts Point site.

Westhab’s most recent expansion of Youth Services comes in the form of a NYS Dept. of Education 21st Century Community Learning Center grant last year in partnership with a Yonkers public school 13 that is just getting underway.

In total, more than 2,000 young people are now able to take advantage of Westhab’s Youth Services programs at eight Centers in White Plains, Yonkers, Mount Vernon, and the Bronx.

Employment Services

Westhab has also become Westchester’s leading provider of employment services for people on public assistance and with obstacles to gaining employment. “We started many years ago by training people for specific trades – mechanics, office workers, security personnel,” says Miller. “We even had our own licensed school for training security guards.”

Over time, however, the agency heard from employers that they could do the trade specific training if Westhab could prepare candidates with the basic skills they needed to be in the workplace. “We began focusing on job readiness,” says Miller.

Now, Westhab works with approximately 2,500 individuals at any given point in time, including 1,600 public assistance recipients in Mount Vernon. “We place over 500 people in jobs each year with average salaries of \$9.50 an hour,” says Miller. Westhab has also created targeted employment programs for specific populations, including young adults and the re-entry population.

Westhab’s Employment Services Department applies a client-centered casework approach to identifying an individual’s strengths and barriers to employment. As Jim Coughlin, Westhab’s Vice President of Adult & Employment Services, puts it, “This isn’t about just hitting our numbers or achieving certain benchmarks. This is about setting people up for long term success by placing them in jobs that they enjoy, where they can excel, and that offer career tracks that can result in promotions and growth.” Westhab markets its clients to employers, hosting frequent job fairs and forming an Employer Advisory Board to advise training programs.

Over the past three years, Westhab’s efforts have resulted in nearly 1,500 job placements with 70% retaining employment for 90 days or more.

Housing

The move beyond homelessness has allowed Westhab to advance its original efforts to develop affordable housing, while also creating a series of supportive housing programs for groups with specialized service needs.

The agency has completed 28 developments in Westchester County and has an additional 4 projects currently in development in Westchester and New York City. These represent a total in-



Westhab is one of Westchester County’s leading provider of services for homeless families.



Westhab is Westchester’s leading provider of employment services for people on public assistance.

vestment of about \$150 million and provide more than 650 units of affordable and/or supportive housing.

Highlights include:

- 28 Pier Street, a 12-unit housing project for veterans in Yonkers built in 2007, which was awarded the Downstate Project of the Year by the NYS Association for Affordable Housing.

- 41 Clinton Place, an extremely attractive 25-unit affordable housing development in New Rochelle completed in 2008, which features a roof-top patio area with stunning views over Long Island Sound.

- 29 Kress Avenue, which provides 40 one-bedroom, bright and spacious apartments for seniors in New Rochelle, was constructed in 2012 in partnership with the Shiloh Baptist Church. “This housing provides seniors with a sense of security that they will have affordable permanent housing they will be able to afford for the rest of their lives,” says Ken Belfer, Senior VP for Housing.

Other recent specialized housing programs include Stepping Stones, a transitional housing program for homeless young adults which Westhab opened last year in partnership with The Children’s Village; First Steps, a scattered site housing program for 32 young parents and their children; and the Burling Lane Employment

Residence, a 10-unit transitional housing program for single men on parole.

Several additional projects – including a 68-unit building with 50 units of OMH-funded supportive housing in the Bronx, and a 71-unit affordable senior housing building in Yonkers – are in active development.

Westhab’s most recently completed affordable housing development – 22 Tarrytown Road in Greenburgh – is particularly representative of the agency’s history and evolution. The location was originally the site of a welfare-motel which Westhab took over and ran as a shelter for homeless men. However, when the agency announced plans to demolish the former structure and construct 28 units of new attractive and affordable “workforce housing”, for families, it was faced with vehement opposition from the neighborhood.

“There is just tremendous resistance to affordable housing throughout Westchester,” says Miller. “This project took six years to build: Zoning and Planning Board hearings, litigation with neighbors, loss of funding. Ultimately we get it built and then opposition ceases. People forget that we are there.”

“There is no better poetic justice than replacing a worn down shelter with beautiful, new housing. This project truly symbolizes moving from band-aids to solutions,” says Nightingale. “Our buildings do not look like what most people would expect when they think about affordable housing; We’re usually the most attractive building on the street.”

Transition

Looking ahead, Miller is confident that he is leaving Westhab in good hands. “Nothing is more gratifying than having spent your life trying to build something and knowing that when the time comes, there is someone who can step right in and continue to move it seamlessly forward,” he says. Nightingale began his association with Westhab as a college student. “I talked them into giving me a summer job working with kids in the shelter,” he says. “I immediately fell in love with the work and with the mission. Once I graduated, I began working full-time at Westhab and I’ve worked in a number of roles since- from the front-lines to supervision and administration.”

“Rich really gets it,” says Miller. “He understands the mission and the culture, and most of all, has the skills to do what needs to be done.”

Nightingale credits Miller with tremendous leadership for the agency and more than a decade of personal mentorship. “He is the best there is at this”, Nightingale shared. “I’m proud and honored to succeed someone of such character, class, and commitment to the mission. I’m excited for Westhab’s next chapter and I feel a deep responsibility to continue our long, successful history of going about our business ‘the right way.’”

Nightingale will inherit a senior leadership team that Miller calls the ‘strongest in our history.’ As part of the agency’s transition, Jim Coughlin is being promoted to Senior Vice President of Services continuing his work with Ken Belfer, Senior Vice President of Housing, Patricia Vitelli, Vice President of Finance, and Treacy Sayres, Vice President of Real Estate Development. Westhab’s Board of Directors, led by Chairman Thomas Brock, as well as Westhab’s staff have embraced this change and there is excitement throughout the agency for a bright future ahead.