

NEWS

Services and subsidized housing for young adults coming through Bremerton project

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A Warren Avenue property near downtown Bremerton, across from Kitsap Community Resources' home and once the site of three abandoned houses and a small commercial building, is now the site of an apartment building soon to become a Bremerton Housing Authority-owned housing option for disadvantaged young people.

The housing service provider will connect 18- to 24 year-olds who may be exiting foster care, homelessness or other precarious positions with housing that they may not be considered for otherwise, and pair that provision with on-site services. The project, called Evergreen Bright Start, will establish 24 of the 30 units in the 811 Warren Avenue apartment for subsidized housing and the other 6 for service provider offices.

The project saw its green light after the BHA received \$6.5 million in grants from the Washington State Department of Commerce last week. Coupled with \$4 million in grants from the City of Bremerton and Kitsap County and \$200,000 from their own pot, the BHA secured funding to acquire the housing complex.

While the developer awaits a certificate of occupancy, the BHA is preparing to close on the deal in the first quarter of 2024 and hopes to have the units fully leased by December.

Making a difference in young adulthood

The BHA's campaign for a youth housing solution found its roots in a 2022 program, Foster Youth to Independence (FYI), that connected young adults aging out of foster care with rental assistance vouchers.

FYI housed 16 young adults in Bremerton and four in other jurisdictions, but U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) funds cover only the voucher, excluding provision for housing navigation and case management. While Olive Crest, a BHA partner in the Evergreen Bright Start project, provided these services with supplemental funding from the County, certain disparities in housing for young adults came to light, said BHA executive director Jill Stanton.

“One of the challenges that we ran into was actually getting a landlord to accept the voucher for a person who had little to no rental history or credit history,” Stanton said. “This population is especially vulnerable, often falling prey to drug dealers and sexual exploitation, starting their journey into adulthood with fear and hopelessness.”

At a formative time in their lives that could be marked by college, exploration, early career and job preparation, young adults aging out of foster care and those facing other housing, mental health and substance abuse challenges can find themselves in dangerous situations.

“A lot of them do end up in homeless situations, unhoused or unsafe situations... so that's where we're trying to intervene so that that doesn't happen,” Stanton said. “It's really hard to provide services that really make a difference when someone doesn't have a safe place to live.”

Harkening back to the aspirations of young adulthood, Stanton envisions young tenants at Evergreen Bright Start not only connecting with services, but also steeping themselves in a community of similarly aged-peers, to “have a space where they can experience a normal and supportive and loving environment, and camaraderie and friendship.”

The young adults would be referred into the program by community partner service providers, Stanton said. Some might be coming from foster care, others from Kitsap Mental Health Services, or homeless shelters. The idea is that they would already have a connection with a local provider that could continue to case-manage them and perhaps connect with other providers present at the housing complex as well.

In-house wraparound services

The BHA and partnering agencies from FYI formed an informal task force, spurred by the assessed need for more housing resources for young adults in the county. Their ultimate goal was not only housing, but to find a property where holistic, wraparound services could

convene to provide space for onsite health services, educational guidance, work training opportunities, case management and individual treatment.

The task force, consisting of KMHS, BHA, Coffee Oasis, Olympic Educational District, and Scarlett Road are being joined by Olive Crest, KCR, PCHS, and possibly Olympic College that could all provide services to Evergreen Bright Start's young adult tenants. Stanton welcomes even more partnering agencies.

"It would provide foundational community support for these young people, helping them to thrive and putting them on a pathway for lifetime positive outcomes," Stanton said in a news statement.

Kitsap Mental Health Services has agreed to provide services at Evergreen Bright Start and recently received two grants to provide rental assistance and behavioral health services to young adult residents.

KMHS will be able to staff an on-site team consisting of a therapist, a case manager for resource connection, care coordinator, peer support specialist and a leading supervisor with grant funding from the federal Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration and the Washington State Department of Commerce Office of Homeless Youth, said executive director Monica Bernhard.

The in-house service providers will be able to service young adults outside of the Evergreen Bright Start complex as well, and KMHS will also be able to send in other team members from their main office who specialize in services like employment and substance use disorder treatment.

"This is largely an underserved population – that's a typical place and time in life when young people are transitioning into adulthood and they tend to have less access to services and tend to have more need for those services during that time," Bernhard said. "We're capturing them right at the onset and that's what's critical and that's what's beautiful about this program."

The other partnering services will provide tenants with opportunities in their own areas of expertise, giving tenants a path toward developing skills to move down a path of success and independence, Stanton said. The partners have also agreed to secure their own funding to provide such services.

“The idea is that they will have easy access to whatever services that they need to be successful in being housed and having a positive outcome for their lives from the start, giving them the base that they need to go into life and be successful,” Stanton said.

But partnerships with service providers only goes so far without participation from developers.

Listening to the demand for low-income housing

Developer Dale Sperling owns 811 Warren Avenue and had originally planned to pursue a deal with Olympic College to construct student housing on the property, before opting to create market rate housing there instead. Sperling didn't have the BHA in his sites originally, but was later approached by Stanton with a proposition.

In early stages, Stanton and the task force thought about pursuing a solution where developers and landlords would agree to create preferences for voucher holders, securing housing for young adults in that manner, Stanton said. This was her original proposition to Sperling, until a discussion arose about the BHA acquiring the building altogether for the Young Adult Housing Program.

Stanton began discussing with Sperling “the need for affordable housing, and to explore how private developers could work with BHA on creating more affordable housing,” she said in the news statement.

“We know there's a huge demand for what I call workforce housing, not luxury housing, in Bremerton, and so I guess my view is build to where the market is,” Sperling said. “High rent is not where the demand is – the demand is low and moderate income rent.”

Building a model

Stanton expects that the 24 units will fill up quickly once they are available to lease, as the need will likely outweigh housing resources. So, the Evergreen Bright Start project may prove to be a trailblazer.

As Bremerton and the larger Kitsap County contend with a growing demand for affordable housing, the Evergreen Bright Start project stands as a testament toward collaboration and expediency, Stanton and Bernhard said.

“This is the first time we've had a kind of a collaboration across community partners to come together to serve a very much needed population – that type of collaboration across sectors, I mean, is really unheard of,” Bernhard said. “If you compare Pendleton Place, it took us five years from the initial grant application... We were able to pull this thing together in about a year's time. I think that it sets a model for how housing projects should be done going forward.”

Another notable characteristic of the project is that it will not only convene resources within a housing complex, but the units and services will also be low barrier.

“We want to make sure that Evergreen Bright Start is as low barrier as possible – that's why it's key that we don't require engagement in services” for acceptance, Bernhard said. “It's grounded in the housing first model... I think it's definitely a recipe for success.”