

Veterans Outreach Center celebrates 50 years of service to local veterans

By: [Andrea Deckert](#) March 8, 2023

The Veterans Outreach Center (VOC) is used to overcoming challenges.

The VOC was initially founded in 1973 as the Veterans Outreach Project under the non-profit organization Action for a Better Community with funding from Congress.

When the government ended that program, however, local Vietnam veterans knew that there had to be a way to maintain those services.

So, in 1979 the Veterans Outreach Project became the [Veterans Outreach Center](#), where the sole mission was to help veterans in need.

Despite off-and-on funding challenges over the last half century, the VOC has not only remained in operation but also significantly expanded its footprint to now serve over 1,500 men and women each year.

This year the VOC is celebrating its 50th year in operation.



Laura Stradley

Laura Stradley, executive director of the VOC and a U.S. Army veteran, said part of the center's longevity can be attributed to strong community partnerships and securing sustainable sources of funding.

“We’ve always been passionate about our mission,” she said.

The VOC offers a range of support for veterans across the Finger Lakes, including job training programs, employment assistance, mental health support, a fitness center, hydromassage, a barbershop, social clubs and therapeutic groups, housing for homeless veterans and low-income veteran families, food and clothing, free RTS bus passes, an emergency fund and case management for veterans that are justice-involved.

All services are delivered at no cost to veterans.

The organization has a roughly \$4 million operating budget and nearly 50 employees.

Stradley said the organization is always adjusting to the market and filling in the gaps. “We find ways to meet the need,” she said.



The Fitness Center provides a place to work on physical as well as mental fitness. (Photo provided)

For example, the VOC — as part of a joint venture with Conifer Realty — created the first affordable housing complex for veterans in the region, called Liberty Landing on Scio Street.

Last year, the VOC unveiled an expansion of program offerings for local veterans with the opening of the Fitness Center at VOC.

As part of its health and wellness services, the fitness center provides a space where veterans can decompress, get in a good workout and connect with other veterans, Stradley said, noting the center is designed to be individualized and welcoming to veterans of all fitness levels.

Earlier this year, the VOC broke ground on a roughly \$7 million upgrade and expansion project at the Richards House, a residence for homeless veterans located in the South Wedge. It is the organization's largest capital project to date.

The renovations to Richards House are part of the VOC's Operation Safe Haven campaign, which is focused on creating additional transitional and emergency housing units. The expansion there will increase the number of beds for homeless veterans.



Rendering of Richards House, dedicated to housing homeless veterans, in Rochester's South Wedge. (Image provided)

The project will also include adding an elevator for the three-story building, expanded laundry and common spaces and additional bathrooms. In addition, there will be more privacy with a shift from four- to six-person bays to single- and double-occupancy rooms. Among the upcoming challenges for the organization is finding ways to have more face-to-face interactions with veterans, Stradley said.

She noted that people are now opting for more virtual interactions, and, as a result, visiting American Legion halls and VFW locations less frequently. That lack of in-person communication can lead to isolation, which has shown to impact mental health, Stradley said.

Bail reform laws also create unintended consequences for veterans because while the change reduces or eliminates the chance of jail time, it often deters vets from seeking the help they may need when dealing with challenges ranging from job training to addiction treatment.

Despite challenges for a small portion of the population, Stradley said the majority of veterans continue to show they are assets to a workplace.

She said veterans have several skills learned on the field that translate to the workplace, noting they are team players, mission focused, trainable and adaptable.

"They bring a tremendous value to the workplace," she said. "The level of commitment they can bring to a company is unparalleled."

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