

Sober living restarts at Winston Prouty



Chloe Learey, executive director of the Winston Prouty Center for Child and Family Development, and Peter Mumma, senior vice president of Phoenix House, go over plans Thursday to turn the Wheeler House into a substance abuse residential treatment facility.
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By Chris Mays, Brattleboro Reformer

BRATTLEBORO — A sober-living facility is coming to a spot on Winston Prouty's 184-acre campus historically used for transitional housing.

"We want to align with community interests and we really love what Winston Prouty is doing," said Peter Mumma, senior vice president of Phoenix House. "We help people to restart their lives when people have stumbled."

Women's sober-living programs, hosted by Phoenix House at the Brattleboro Retreat-owned 122 Linden St., are expected to be relocated to the 4,300-square-foot Wheeler House by the end of the year.

Other Winston Prouty tenants include Families First, Health Care and Rehabilitation Services of Vermont and Brattleboro Area Prevention Coalition.

The Wheeler House has been around for a long time and was moved so Interstate 91 could be built, said Chloe Learey, executive director of the Winston Prouty Center for Child and Family Development. Previously, the property hosted the Austine School for the Deaf and was used for transitional housing. At one time, Brattleboro Housing Partnerships looked at hosting subsidized apartments there.

Phoenix House programming coming to the site is meant to support women experiencing alcohol and drug use issues — "Vermont's mothers, daughters and sisters," said Mumma. He praised the new site for being within close proximity to resources on campus, Brattleboro Memorial Hospital and a bus route coming soon.

It will have the same capacity: Up to 25 women will be able stay at a time. New sprinklers were among "significant renovations" being planned.

"Safety is our paramount concern for our clients at all times," Mumma said. "We want to make a humanizing environment."

There will be bedrooms, counseling rooms, rooms for group sessions and a kitchen area. During the day, clients will go out to appointments and 12-step meetings. Later in their recovery, they may be working jobs or visiting family members.

Phoenix House offers programs for men and women in other locations around New England. The New York City-based nonprofit rehabilitation organization started about 50 years ago and has been in Brattleboro for 20 years. It offers men's programming on Western Avenue in Brattleboro and on Underhill Avenue in Bellows Falls.

Clients come by self referral or through social service agencies, hospitals, probation or other treatment and detox programs. Mumma estimates "tens of thousands" of women have come through Brattleboro programming. He called the residential program a "stepping stone to true, independent living" as it teaches clients how to manage triggers and stress.

"I think a lot of people don't know Phoenix House is such a big part of our community and has helped so many people," said Learey.

One of the goals of the Winston Prouty campus, she said, is to have collaboration across sectors. That includes supporting families struggling with issues related alcohol and drugs.

Mumma commended Brattleboro organizations for their "acceptance and aggressiveness" in dealing with substance-use issues.

"Frankly, we love the excellence we've seen in town," he said.



The Wheeler House on the Winston Prouty campus.
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His group had explored opening two additional residential facilities in Bellows Falls, one of them being a relocation of women's programming from Brattleboro. But it "turned out not to be a viable option for us," said Mumma. Zoning appeals had been filed against the project.

Mumma said the Linden Street facility felt too institutional, when his group wanted clients to be thinking about home.

"We are very grateful to Brattleboro Retreat for the space we had," he said, calling it an "institution steeped in tradition" with "fantastic, quality outcomes." "This will allow us to reset the expectation for what home is."



Chloe Learey, executive director for Winston Prouty Center for Child and Family Development, and Peter Mumma, senior vice president of Phoenix House, go over plans to turn the Wheeler House into a substance abuse residential treatment facility on Thursday, Sept. 20, 2018.

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Konstantin von Krusenstiern, vice president of development and communications for the Retreat, said his group does not have any tenants scheduled to move in at the moment.

"Phoenix House, and their clients, were excellent tenants," he said in an email. "We greatly value the mission of Phoenix House."

Mumma said he would be talking with Winston Prouty officials about whether to keep the Wheeler House name. Both parties were preparing to sign a lease document around the time of the interview late Thursday morning.

The house is included in a planned-unit development on the property. The Phoenix House project is "well within the institutional zoning, which is what the campus is," said Learey.

"We think this is one of the things the municipality intended as a potential use," Mumma said. "That's also one of the reasons we thought Winston Prouty made sense."

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