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VIETNAM VETERANS

Coming Home

It was not at all what John Hawkins, a homeless Vietnam-era veteran, had expected when a psychiatric caseworker packed him off to a newly built single-room-occupancy residence in Bushwick last spring.

On a weathered stretch of Knickerbocker Avenue, where buildings sag and graffiti grows like psychedelic ivy, Hawkins stood with his sack of belongings before an impeccable five-story building that looked more like a college dormitory than a state-financed institution.

Inside, the hallways wore coats of rose, teal and yellow paint. Each of the 48 efficiency apartments bore subtle touches of civility, from two-tone doorbells to full bathrooms. Here was the privacy Hawkins had once craved as a faceless denizen of the city's barracks-style shelters.

"I can't find the words to describe this place," says Hawkins, who is now well along in his recovery from heroin addiction and the depression that fueled it after his release from the Army. He traces his hopefulness back to his arrival at 832-42 Knickerbocker Avenue. "I mean, it is beautiful," he says.

Most neighborhoods loathe the prospect of housing for the homeless. But in the streets around "Knickerbocker"—the residence

has yet to be formally named—the announcement of the plan to build the facility did not bring howls of compassion fatigue. Recognizing that the area's chief concern was joblessness, the facility's operators promised to reserve some of the 21 low-skill jobs for local residents.

Built by the New York State Office of Mental Health, which

spent a relatively modest \$2.8 million for construction, the Knickerbocker opened its doors in April 1995, with the nonprofit group Services for the Under-served winning the contract to operate the facility.

The Knickerbocker is considered a model residence for homeless veterans who have been held hostage all these years by addiction and mental illness. Here, veterans who fall off the sobriety wagon are not automatically expelled from the residence, as is the case at many housing pro-



In Bushwick, a measure of dignity in housing for homeless veterans.

grams for homeless people with a history of drug and alcohol abuse.

"Yes, we do have the occasional resident who returns at night high as a kite," admits Steve Warren, executive director of Services for the Underserved since 1987. "But I have a big problem with demanding abstinence of these guys. Once you kick them out the door, you may lose them." A Vietnam vet and one-time heroin addict himself (he became addicted while serving in South-

east Asia), Warren speaks from personal experience. "If no one had cut me some slack years ago, I can tell you, I would be in prison or dead," he says.

In fact, Warren served time in prison after his release from the military. Strung out and in need of cash, he held up a restaurant. Warren's long road to recovery bore him through a wide variety of drug-treatment facilities coast to coast. Finally he pulled himself together at Project Return back in

New York, eventually becoming a social worker.

Services for the Underserved operates nine residential programs with a total of 487 beds for mentally ill adults. But Knickerbocker is the only one in New York City strictly for troubled vets, whose federal disability checks cover the \$516 monthly rent. The facility provides one meal a day and—in a reflection of Warren's empathetic approach—a bottomless cup of coffee.

—Robert Polner