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For three years after Hurricane Katrina, the Volunteers of America facility at 1002 Napoleon Ave. was used as housing for volunteers who arrived in the city to help with recovery effort. A \$291,850 grant from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs provided half the cost of renovating the Napoleon Avenue building so Volunteers of America could restore its homeless veterans program.

Housing for veterans to reopen

Three VOA locations damaged in Katrina

By Valerie Faciane
Staff writer

Beginning this month, a transitional housing program for homeless veterans that shut down after Hurricane Katrina will once again accept clients.

The Volunteers of America of Greater New Orleans facility at 1002 Napoleon Ave., along with two independent-living homes in Mid-City, were heavily damaged during the storm. Their reopening means 56 new beds for homeless veterans in the New Orleans area, who number somewhere between 1,200 and 2,600 in Orleans and Jefferson parishes.

Many of the veterans have substance-abuse and mental-health problems and require support services to help them

recover, said VOA President and CEO James LeBlanc.

"They served our country, and they're back and we just want to support them," he said.

Getting all of the VOA's hurricane-damaged housing programs back up and running after Katrina has been LeBlanc's biggest challenge.

The organization lost all 1,050 of its permanent housing units for working families and the elderly, LeBlanc said. Two hundred and fifty of the units have been restored, with 700 more in various stages of redevelopment, officials said.

Other programs offered by the VOA, including adoption services, mentoring, after-school activities and services for those with chronic mental illness, were restored not long after Hurricane Katrina, LeBlanc said.

The VOA operated the homeless veterans transitional housing program from 2001 until Katrina

struck, said Alan Kohorst, the organization's vice president of business and resource development.

After that program was shut down, its Napoleon Avenue facility was used for three years as housing for volunteers who arrived in the city to help with recovery effort. The building ultimately provided temporary housing for about 30,000 volunteers.

"We just came to the conclusion that the highest need was to be about housing the out-of-state volunteers," LeBlanc said.

But as the numbers of volunteers dwindled in 2008, the local office of the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs urged the VOA to restore the homeless veterans program, Kohorst said.

The VA awarded the VOA a grant of \$291,850 — half of the cost of renovating the Napoleon Avenue building, Kohorst said.

"Our challenge was that we



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had to go out to match or raise funds for right at \$300,000," he said.

The organization raised the money through a capital campaign. Renovation work began Dec. 15, 2008, and now is complete.

The VA pledged to provide continuing financial support for the veterans' care, Kohorst said.

Unity of Greater New Orleans secured \$450,000 from the state Department of So-

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Complex for elderly being built on Tulane

HOMELESS, from B-1

cial Services for renovation of the two Mid-City independent-living facilities, Kohorst said.

The transitional housing program for veterans is sorely needed to get more veterans off the streets, said Martha Kegel, executive director of Unity, a collaborative of 60 agencies working to meet needs of the homeless population.

"It is a shameful situation that so many people who faithfully served their nation in the armed forces end up homeless," Kegel said. "Homeless service providers need a closer partnership with the VA to ensure that veterans with complex disabilities, who are living in abandoned buildings and on the streets, get the housing and services they need."

In the early phases of the VOA's housing effort, homeless veterans will reside at the

40-bed Napoleon Avenue facility. There, they will be provided semi-private rooms, balanced meals, counseling, recreation and 12 classes to help them recover from substance abuse and mental health problems, Kohorst said.

After graduating from that treatment program, they are assigned to one of the homes in Mid-City, where they will move toward independent living, continuing their therapy, finding jobs and preparing to resume lives on their own, Kohorst said.

All veterans who want to participate in the program must go through a screening process and undergo an evaluation by the VA, so that their individual problems can be diagnosed and an individual therapeutic program can be designed, he said.

The revival of residential programs for veterans meshes with an overall VOA strategy to maintain, and add to, its offer-



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Earl Scott of Louisiana Office Products, left, and Alan Kohorst of VOA move furniture into the building.

ings in the core city, where medical and other support services are available.

Less than a year after Katrina, the VOA reopened the Duvernay House, a 70-unit single-room-occupancy apartment building on Canal Street. Six months later, the organization reopened 81 single-occupancy apartments on Tulane Avenue. Both serve people struggling with addictive disorders.

Among other VOA projects, a 200-apartment complex for the

elderly, to be known as the Terraces on Tulane, is being built at 3615 Tulane Ave.

Outside of New Orleans, the VOA is working with the Habitat for Humanity to develop 15 acres in Covington. The organization plans to build 140 housing units at the site, including rentals and units that will be sold, LeBlanc said.

Valerie Faciane can be reached at vfaciane@timespicayune.com or 504.826.3342.