



SUSAN'S PLACE

Champlain Housing Trust

Essex Junction, Vermont

WRITTEN BY MARY TINGERTHAL FOR THE NATIONAL ALLIANCE TO END HOMELESSNESS

PROJECT OVERVIEW

Champlain Housing Trust is a community land trust that has served northwestern Vermont since 1984. It has been exploring the conversion of hotels into housing since 2013, when it purchased its first hotel property. Having converted two hotel properties to permanent supportive housing prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, Champlain Housing Trust teamed up with other organizations to advocate with the Vermont legislature in May 2020 to allocate federal Coronavirus Relief Funds (CRF) to be used to acquire and rehabilitate hotels into permanent housing or non-congregate shelter for people experiencing homelessness. Legislative action in June of 2020 allocated nearly \$33 million to the Vermont Housing and Conservation Board (VHCB) for this purpose.

Champlain Housing Trust submitted a successful application to VHCB for the conversion of a Baymont Inn and Suites in Essex Junction, VT with 113 hotel rooms into Susan's Place, a permanent housing development with 68 units for homeless individuals and families. The 4-story, L-shaped building included many fully functional one-bedroom units with kitchenettes. It also allowed for the combination of several adjoining hotel units into one and two-bedroom housing units including kitchenettes. The property has ample community space and both surface and garage parking. The property was named in the memory of longtime Champlain Housing Trust social worker Susan Ainsworth-Daniels, who passed away in April 2020.

Essex Junction is a community of 9,300 people located just east of Vermont's largest city, Burlington. The property is located in a mixed-use area adjacent to a residential community, and is served by a bus route.

ACQUISITION AND REHABILITATION OF THE PROJECT

Champlain Housing Trust acquired the property that would become Susan's Place in September of 2020 for an acquisition cost of \$11,663,850 (\$171,527 per housing unit). With rehabilitation and development costs of \$1,157,500 (\$17,022 per housing unit), the total development costs for the project were \$12,821,350 (\$188,549 per housing unit).

Scope of Rehabilitation Work

The property was in good condition upon acquisition, and the majority of the rehabilitation expense was needed to convert the hotel units into fewer, but larger, residential units. The primary categories of work included:

- **Combining multiple hotel rooms into residential units.** The zoning code for the site required a lower density as a residential property than had been allowed as a hotel. Therefore the 113 original hotel rooms were combined in several different patterns to create 68 rental units, each with one or two bedrooms.
- **Changes to fire safety and electrical configurations.** The residential building code required that there be an electrical panel for each housing unit, which had not been required for individual hotel rooms. Because hotel units were combined to create a smaller number of residential units, the fire panel had to be reconfigured to reflect the combined units.
- **Reconfiguration of common space.** While the property had ample common space, it required some reconfiguration to create offices for the on-site property manager, social workers serving the property, a community room, and a large common laundry room. A pool on the property was filled and reconfigured as an outdoor common space for residents.

Regulatory matters

The conversion of the property to residential use triggered a zoning requirement to reduce the density of the property from 113 hotel rooms to 68 residential units. Because of the very short timeline imposed by the CRF requirements, Champlain Housing Trust decided not to pursue a zoning variance, resulting in a building with fewer housing units and a higher cost per unit than the ideal.

The entire process from permitting through acquisition and rehabilitation took five months, with move-in of the first permanent residents in November 2020.



PROPERTY OPERATIONS AND SERVICES

Susan's Place is operating as permanent housing with the availability of on-site support services. The Burlington Housing Authority and the Vermont State Housing Authority allocated 14 project-based vouchers and 30 tenant-based vouchers to the project. Other tenants have received temporary housing vouchers from various federal funding sources.

Champlain Housing Trust is a member of the Chittenden County Homeless Alliance steering committee and coordinated entry committee. Tenants are referred to Susan's Place through the coordinated entry system.

Some rooms at the hotel had previously been leased by Vermont's Department of Children and Families (DCF) for use as non-congregate shelter. Because the rehabilitation was done on a phased basis, these families were able to stay at the hotel until the rehabilitation work was completed. Some families were able to be located in permanent housing at Susan's Place following the property rehabilitation.

Champlain Housing Trust has hired a social worker dedicated to Susan's Place, and that social worker maintains an office at the property. The social worker maintains relationships with the Burlington Housing Authority, the Veteran's Administration, and Howard Center, which provides developmental, mental health, and substance use and recovery services.

KEY SUCCESS FACTORS

- It is important to understand local zoning codes for properties being considered for acquisition. In the case of Susan's Place, the number of units allowed for a permanent residential property was significantly lower than the number of units allowed for a hotel.
- Building code requirements are typically different for permanent residential properties than they are for hospitality properties. Fire safety and electrical codes were major items that affected the scope of rehabilitation for Susan's Place. The costs for improvements to older hotel properties that were originally built under less stringent code requirements may be prohibitively expensive.
- Property security requirements are essential for the safety of the residents, and it is important to budget for on-going security items such as additional security cameras and third-party security patrols for overnight hours.
- Close coordination with existing service providers is essential to ensure that the needed services are available for the residents.



Contact Information

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Vermont Housing and Conservation Board (<https://vhcb.org/our-programs/housing/coronavirus-relief-funds/2020-crf-awards>)

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