

## **Building Bridges 2020 Diocesan Convention Report**

Like the larger Church, the pandemic has dramatically affected Building Bridges. Until the COVID-19 outbreak in March, Building Bridges' nine communities across the Diocese were convening approximately 350 veterans per week. Due to the in-person nature of the initiative, the pandemic necessitated a strategic shift, and the sites to be temporarily suspended.

During this hiatus, the Building Bridges leadership has diverted its energy from producing 16,000 meals a year, to innovation and the development of infrastructure. Given the continuing demand to expand, this lull could be seen as opportune. It has given the leadership time to explore possibilities beyond providing a meal, hosting veteran services, and providing intermittent programming.

Current strategic activities include the enhancement of the Building Bridges website ([www.buildingbridgesveterans.org](http://www.buildingbridgesveterans.org)) to provide an active resource and means of communication for Building Bridges members. In concert with Steve Abdow and Human2Human we have created systems and templates for a regular monthly newsletter and intermittent fundraising appeals. In the interest of increasing public awareness of the long-lived initiative, we are archiving the abundant media coverage Building Bridges has enjoyed. The local television and radio stations, and western Massachusetts newspapers, continue to support the Initiative by its faithful coverage.

In early summer, Building Bridges hosted several "drive-through" luncheons, distributing to-go lunches and materials to veterans in their cars. We have decided to restart the strategy on a monthly basis in three locations -- Greenfield, Chicopee and Northampton -- which will continue through the winter. While we have to face the uncertainty about what will be possible in the spring, we are strategizing to effectively operate for that inevitably different context.

Specifically, it is likely indoor dining will remain problematic. Therefore, we are looking at outdoor possibilities for community development, including marrying vegetable gardens to Building Bridges sites in collaboration with the national Good New Gardens Episcopal initiative. Because Gulf War Veterans often have jobs and families, we believe this opportunity might better serve this younger demographic which is unable to avail itself of a mid-day meal.

It is clear that the mission of Building Bridges -- to promote Veteran health, minimize Veteran social isolation, and prevent Veteran suicide -- has struck a chord beyond the Diocese. The ground has been prepared for a first site in the Diocese of Massachusetts, as well as a first site in the Diocese of New Hampshire. Given the sobering truth that every day twenty U.S. Veterans take their own lives, it is with deep gratitude to the Diocese for the privilege of carrying out this critical work.

Respectfully Submitted,  
The Rev. Christopher Carlisle, Director  
The Building Bridges Veterans Initiative,  
The Episcopal Diocese of Western Massachusetts

