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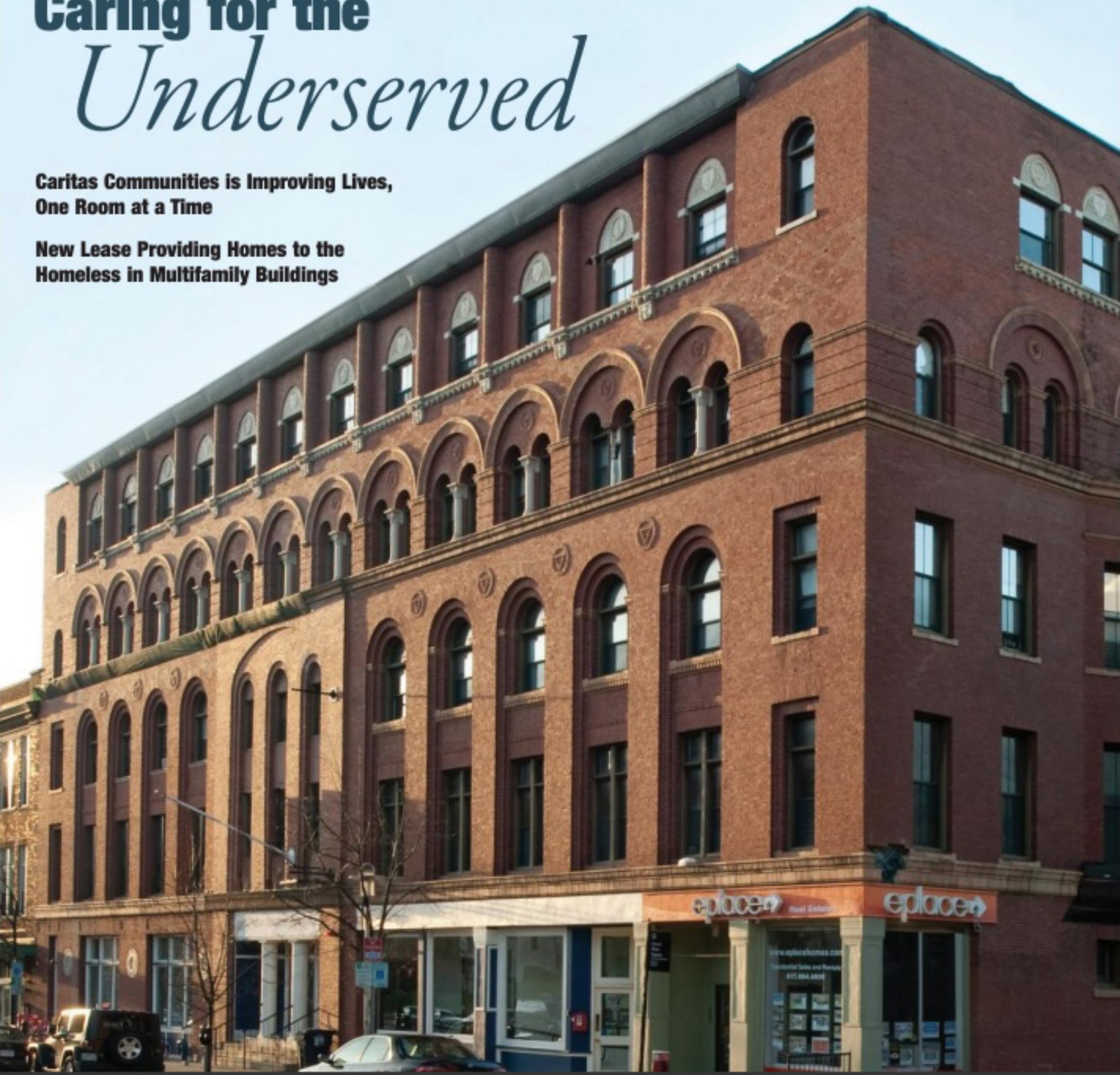
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Caring for the *Underserved*

**Caritas Communities is Improving Lives,
One Room at a Time**

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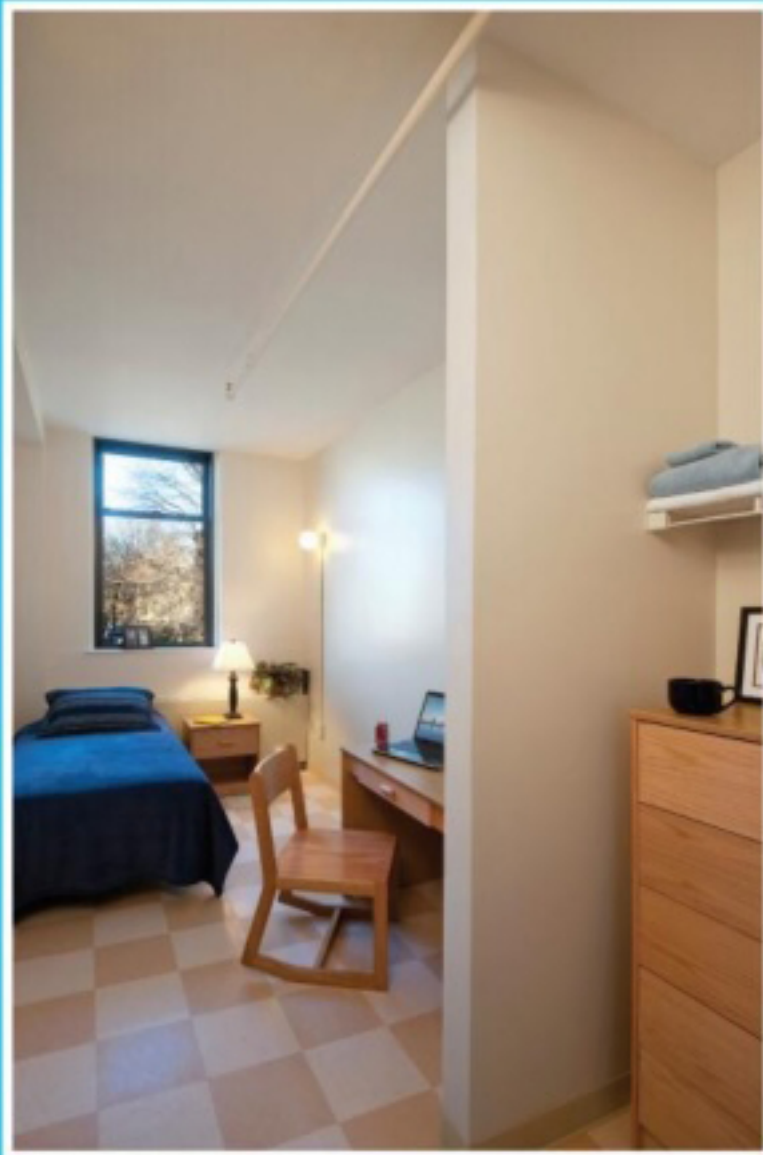


Caritas *Communities*

Improving Lives, One Room at a Time

By Debbie Swanson





It's all about considering someone's life outside of the present moment, says Mark Winkeller, executive director of Caritas Communities in Braintree.

"Many individuals who work in the service sector for modest wages are invisible to others unless they do a bad job. Customers seldom consider the struggle that another person may be facing just to secure a basic need, like housing," he reflects.

But thanks to Caritas Communities, many of those working individuals no longer need to worry about where they're going to sleep that night, or how they'll wash up for work the next morning. Committed to providing safe, affordable housing to the homeless and low-income wage

earners, Caritas has enabled over 895 individuals to have a place to come home to.

Caritas began in 1985, when the high number of homeless individuals in Boston led P. Leo Corcoran to seek a solution through affordable housing. Tapping into his own background in real estate and development, and working with a carefully chosen board of directors, he founded Caritas Communities. The organization began by purchasing properties to be renovated into single-room occupancy (SRO) residences – a "rooming house" model of living. The properties were remodeled to offer

Continued on page 10





private, furnished bedrooms, a shared kitchen and bath, and access to a common living area. Each house had a designated live-in manager.

Corcoran passed away in 2010, yet Caritas grew to become the largest nonprofit owner and manager of permanent veteran and SRO housing in Greater Boston. Buildings today exist in Boston, Arlington, Bedford, Braintree, Brookline, Chelsea, Everett, Medford, Melrose, New Bedford, Quincy, Salem and Wakefield, all of which are within walking distance of public transportation.

Winkeller says Caritas' present goals include creating more strategic partnerships in order to help residents achieve greater independence.

"We'd like to be able to refer residents out for needed services, such as job training, assistance filling out paperwork, or helping them to understand the benefits to which they're entitled," says Winkeller.

Two of Caritas' properties have successful on-site social services programs aimed at building self-sufficiency: Cambridge's Central House, which provides 128 units, and the Bedford Veterans Quarters, which offers 60 units in a renovated building at the Bedford Veterans Hospital.

Managing the Flood

As expected, a flood of applicants vie for Caritas housing, and being able to assist those who need it most can be a challenge.

"The lowest-income earners are often the hardest to help. You can be too poor for our program," says Winkeller. "For example, if your income is \$14,000 a year, and your average weekly rent is \$135, amounting to \$7,000 a year, that's half your income."

Caritas' guidelines prohibit taking such a large chunk of income.

"We'd need to have a program based rent subsidy, or the individual applicant needs to apply and obtain his or her own voucher," he says.

Public donations are always welcome, both in-kind and financial. The living units are provided with basic furnishings: a bed, bureau, tables, chairs, lamps. But beyond that, many of the individuals are in need of household items or clothing, and common areas benefit from donated items that lend a comfortable, home-like feel.

Recently, a family from Cohasset learned that several of the community's residents didn't have their own can opener.



"They solicited their community and ran a successful can opener drive," he says.

While in-kind donations of new or used items are always welcome, Winkeller stresses that donors remain mindful of the quality of the items, and of the underlying message that the goods deliver to the recipients.

"We're trying to give these people a fresh start," he explains. Caritas discourages items that show signs of use and wear, and even new items that are seconds or irregular.

Caritas' efforts not only benefit their residents, but also the neighboring community. They are always on the lookout for existing properties in need of rehabilitation, or for vacant, buildable land. Two Boston area renovations are slated to begin in the fall: a building which will provide 40 units of housing on Cortez Street in Bay Village, where three-quarters of residents will have a private kitchen, and another property on D Street in South Boston, which will give preference to veterans.

"My work at Caritas really sharpened my understanding of the need for affordable housing and support services," says Winkeller. "There are plenty of people in need. If this mission isn't critical to you, find somewhere else to help. Put your energy somewhere." ■