

Valley Cares assisted-living plans expansion

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TOWNSHEND -- When the West River Valley Senior Housing complex opened in late 2007, all 52 units were full within three months.

So administrators expect to have no problem filling a dozen additional units that will be built later this year. Valley Cares Inc., a nonprofit that manages the Grafton Road complex, is soliciting construction bids that are due by June 20.

"We're hoping to start construction in September. That's our goal," said Robert Crego, Valley Cares executive director. "We're hoping to have the units open for occupancy in springtime 2013."

West River Valley Senior Housing includes independent and assisted-living apartments. Both have been in high demand.

"It's been extremely successful," Crego said this week during a tour of the assisted-living facility. "We have a waiting list of over 70 for this building and 50 for the other building."

Administrators have chosen to expand assisted living, which includes 24-hour staffing, individualized care plans, medication management, meal plans, housekeeping, laundry and transportation to medical appointments.

The 12 new, one-bedroom apartments and associated common space will cover 9,900 square feet on two floors attached to the current assisted-living building.

As is the case with the current assisted-living apartments, a majority of the new units will be "affordable housing" targeted to seniors who are at or below 60 percent of the area's median income.

Administrators say a market assessment has shown a "supportive market" for additional assisted-living apartments, and point to the facility's consistently long waiting list as evidence.

Also, Susanne Shapiro -- a registered nurse who serves as program director for West River Valley Assisted Living -- said that Vermont has the second-oldest population in the nation.

"Windham County is the oldest county in Vermont," Shapiro added. "So that speaks to the coming need."

To accommodate additional residents, Valley Cares will be expanding the building's kitchen and dining room. Extra apartments also will require more staff.

"We expect four to six more jobs to come with the project," Shapiro said.

Administrators say they've been soliciting input from the complex's residents in order to better design and plan the construction project.

"They want to be included," Shapiro said. "They want to know what's going on, as they should. It's their home."

Valley Cares also has been soliciting donations for the project, which carries an estimated cost of \$2.8 million. Some funding is coming from a local fundraising effort.

"We're trying to raise a half-million dollars locally," Crego said. "We're about halfway there."

Anyone interested in giving to the effort can contact Crego at 802-365-4115.

Last fall, Valley Cares landed a \$575,000 community development block grant -- federal money that is administered by the state. Additionally, the Vermont Housing Finance Agency in April committed \$1.1 million to the expansion project.

A few grant applications still are pending, Crego said.

Housing Vermont is a partner in the project, serving as co-developer and co-owner.

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