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## Hanover Fire Dept. hosts regional training at future home for developmentally disabled

By Meghan Pierce Union Leader Correspondent  
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HANOVER – The Hanover Fire Department held a regional training exercise Saturday for multiple departments at the former senior assisted living residence Outreach House, which is making way for a new home for the developmentally disabled.

“We rely on our mutual aid very heavily in this area,” Lebanon Fire Department Training Officer Jim Wheatley said. “So us getting to know the capabilities and the resources of the other departments and them getting to know us, it just really streamlines and makes everything more fluid when we actually have a true emergency that we respond to together.”

The firefighters were divided into teams, made up of a mix of career and on-call firefighters, and took turns rotating through the three different training scenarios, including forcing a door open and rescuing a missing person through a second-story window.

“They’ve been practicing putting a ground ladder up and climbing up and entering into that bedroom where there is a report of someone missing in that bedroom, which is a technique we don’t really get to practice often in the real world,” Hanover Fire Capt. Josh Merriam said during the training Saturday. “If we arrived on scene ... there might be a situation where somebody presents themselves outside and says, ‘That’s my kid’s bedroom, they’re in bed and I can’t get to them.’ You might make the tactical decision to send someone over a ladder without a hose first to do a quick search. So we are practicing that.”

The third training scenario had firefighters running through the front door of the house with a hose, up the stairs and to the second floor to find an orange cone, which represents the fire. The difficulty is the narrow stairway and the thick smoke generated by a smoke machine, Merriam said.

“It’s a difficult environment to operate in,” Merriam said. “The stairwell’s super tight. The stairwell is not ADA compliant, that’s why (the house) is coming down. With all your equipment on you can barely fit and it’s very difficult especially when you can’t see. It’s just good training.”

The nonprofit Visions for Creative Housing Solutions owns the property, 11 South Park St., and plans to open its third residence there next year.

“(Outreach House) was for seniors assisted living and they closed in 2019,” Visions founder and Executive Director Sylvia Kluge Dow said Saturday. “They gave the property to us because it was a nonprofit and they needed to find another nonprofit with a similar mission. So it was a perfect segue to give it to Visions.”

Since 2019, Visions has been planning and raising money for the project.

“We have to raise \$3 million. We’re halfway there and we’ll probably start construction by the end of this year,” she said.

It was the demolition permitting process in town that brought the property to the attention of the Hanover Fire Department.

“A lot of people don’t know the fire department’s looking for training opportunities when they are in the middle of a teardown,” Merriam said, and with construction and demolition schedules it’s not always possible to organize the time and access to the property for firefighters.

“We’re always looking for structures for training. So if somebody is tearing something down it’s an opportunity for us to get in there and work. I hope this is the start of something, for sure, in the region,” Hanover Fire Capt. Josh Merriam said.

While Hanover has been using the house for training for the past several weeks, Saturday was Hanover’s first chance in a long time to hold a training with its mutual aid partners in the region, Merriam said.

“We’re a career department and we train regularly in the region with our other career counterparts, which would be Hartford (Vermont) and Lebanon,” Merriam said. “The gap that we’ve identified in training is we’re not training on the regular with our call-in volunteer departments.

“Well, in our region if there’s a first alarm fire there is an automatic call for mutual aid, so we are working with them on the regular. Our trainings typically are on weekdays, during the day, because our staff, this is what they do for a living, and we weren’t able to meet the needs of the on-call volunteer departments. The invitation’s there, but the availability isn’t.”

Upper Valley firefighters from nine different departments at the training included firefighters from Hanover, Lebanon, Lyme and Grafton as well as Vermont firefighters from Norwich, Thetford, Hartland, Windsor and Strafford.

“We need each other here, so we embrace each other,” Hanover Fire Chief Martin McMillan said. “I think that’s the attitude in the Upper Valley with everybody. We just come together as a group. ... It’s just advantageous when you have a group of people working together on a regular basis.”

The demolition will allow for the construction of a new ADA-compliant, energy-efficient residence for 12 individuals with developmental or similar disabilities.

“It will be for 12 individuals. It will have studios and two-bedroom apartments,” Dow said.

Visions opened its first residence in 2014 at Sunrise Farm in Enfield, where Dow’s family had a family home and inn.

“My family owned an inn so it was the perfect location. We converted the inn,” she said.

Then in August, it opened its second residence in Lebanon.

Visions was founded by Dow and her husband, David Dow, out of the need they saw in their community as well as in their family.

“We just opened up our second site in Lebanon, so we have a lot going on,” Dow said. “We have such a long waiting list. It’s such a need in our state. I am a parent, of two daughters with developmental disabilities, and I’m getting old and trying to think about what would happen to them if there was no one there to care for them, and one of my daughters needs that 24/7 care and it was exhausting

to tell you the truth and the state doesn't offer really any good options for people. The only option really is the home care provider model, which is like adult foster care, and it's not an ideal situation."

Dow said Visions was happy to give the Hanover department access to the property for several weeks this March and April.

The department hands the property back to Visions on Thursday and demolition is taking place in about a month.

"They are very community-minded and orientated," Merriam said of Visions. "They were all about getting us in here to do this," Merriam said. "I think their mission statement sort of speaks for itself and the fact that they've been so willing to work with us while they are in the middle of this fundraising campaign is just another example of them giving back to the community."