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Vets welcome Bridgewell's interest in extending services

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By Thor Jourgensen/The Daily Item

LYNN — Local veterans agents and workers on Thursday applauded disability and psychiatric care provider Bridgewell's interest in exploring ways to extend services to veterans.

"The more options the better," said Marblehead Veterans Agent David Rodgers.

Bridgewell's board of directors voted Tuesday to endorse efforts by Chief Executive Officer Robert Stearns to "explore, develop and implement Veteran's Services."

Bridgewell Development Director Cari Palmer, in an electronic mail statement, said the board reviewed a resolution calling in part for Bridgewell executives to look into veteran's services, including housing " ... and services that will support and enhance the lives of veterans to reintegrate into the community and workforce and enhance their quality of life."

Bridgewell Housing Director Elaine White on Thursday said the veteran's initiative is "in the very early stages" and requires extensive research, including conversations with organizations already providing services to veterans, including Lynn-based programs.

"A variety of veterans need services from Vietnam War veterans all the way up to Iraq and Afghanistan. We're looking at the feasibility of that and asking what is the population? Are their families involved or just the veterans themselves?" White said.

He added that Christopher Vaccaro listed veterans assistance as one of his goals when he was elected as Bridgewell's board of director's president this year.

"It's something we're really excited about. It's a new path for us," White said.

Rodgers said any effort to expand veteran's services would be a welcome supplement to ones currently offered by the federal government.

"The Veterans Administration tries hard, but it is somewhat overwhelmed," Rodgers said.

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Founded in 1958, Bridgewell is a private, non-profit organization serving individuals 18-years-old or older with developmental and psychiatric disabilities. Based in Lynnfield, Bridgewell currently serves 3,000 clients in 18 communities.

White said Bridgewell representatives have toured existing programs providing veterans with housing and job opportunities.

North Shore Community College Veterans Services Specialist Michael Smith on Thursday said he is confident Bridgewell will find a way to “provide quality assistance” to veterans.

“By them being willing to help, it’s huge,” he said.

Smith, an Army veteran, said the Bridgewell board’s interest in examining programs that help reintegrate veterans into the community is important.

He uses terms like “belongingness,” “collective efficacy” and “connectedness” when he talks about challenges veterans face in leaving military life.

“In the military people have jobs, rank and unit affiliations. The idea is to strengthen people’s resilience, getting them to feel they are part of society again,” Smith said.

He said programs and research need to be directed at aiding veterans who have sustained “invisible injuries,” including post-traumatic stress disorder and traumatic brain injury.

He said studies into these medical problems should be focused, in part, on men and women who have been deployed several times to Iraq and Afghanistan.

“It is not uncommon for someone who has sustained a minor to significant head injury to not recognize it or not want to recognize it. Getting the awareness out that it does not have to be life altering helps,” Smith said.

Swampscott Veterans Services Officer James Schultz said the Veterans Administration needs help offering more housing options to veterans.

“It’s always an issue,” he said.