



## Commission Meeting

May 16, 2023

Charlie Norwood VAMC Revitalization Plan Approval Request

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**Department:** HCD

**Presenter:** Hawthorne Welcher, Jr. and/or HCD Staff

**Caption:** Motion to **approve** the Charlie Norwood VAMC Revitalization Plan as presented by Freedom's Path Augusta III, LP. (**Approved by Administrative Services Committee May 9, 2023**)

**Background:** For over ten years, the US Department of Veterans Affairs has been trying to address several issues through one creative program called the Building Utilization Review and Repurposing (BURR) initiative. Based on an audit of all VA facilities completed in 2011, it was determined that there were approximately 1,400 vacant buildings on VA Medical Center campuses. The VA was spending millions to maintain the buildings to no benefit of anyone. At the same time, it was reported through the Annual Homeless Assessment Report provided to Congress each year that there were almost 100,000 homeless Veterans across the country, not to mention the number of disabled, senior and low-income Veterans who were poorly housed or grossly rent-burdened. This appalling situation was characterized as a national disgrace by politicians and bureaucrats across the political and agency landscape.

The VA decided to make a bold attempt to recruit the private sector in an effort to eliminate functional Veteran homelessness, reduce the number of vacant buildings on its campuses, and enhance the provision of services being offered to its homeless, disabled and low-income Veterans through creative partnerships with developers and non-VA services providers. Using its Congressionally approved ability to lease land on its campuses (Enhanced Use Lease or EUL authority), the VA issued Requests for Proposals across the country for this purpose. The Department of Veterans Affairs has issued and awarded an RFP to redevelop two historic buildings, Buildings 19 and 20, into affordable housing for United States military Veterans on the Charlie Norwood VAMC Uptown Division.

Freedom's Path Augusta III is located at 1 Freedom Way, Augusta, GA 30904, which is on the campus of the Uptown Charlie Norwood VA Medical Center. This project will restore the original historic character of two historic VA

structures Buildings 19 and 20, converting 92,000 square feet of space into 76 units of new affordable Veterans housing.

Originally constructed by the Sisters of St. Joseph as a Catholic boarding school, the Lenwood Hospital is a 1914 historic building with three connected wings, referred to as Buildings 18, 19, and 20 within the VAMC healthcare system. The buildings were leased to the Public Health Service (PHS) in 1920, to be upfitted into a hospital to serve servicemen with nervous and psychiatric disorders. The PHS, later the Veterans Administration, chose the building as it would be easily converted for their needs and included 20 acres of land they could expand on.

Lenwood Hospital is one of only a few surviving examples of early VA hospitals. It falls under First-Generation Veterans Hospitals (1866-1930) and is one of few examples of existing buildings being upfitted for this use. Theories around medical care, especially for those with mental traumas from war, were rapidly changing around this time. Open air and a tranquil setting were becoming important aspects of Veterans' care. Lenwood Hospital was also updated with the newest medical treatment rooms. As medical treatments changed, and the Norwood VA Medical Center expanded, the Lenwood Hospital building underwent different renovation campaigns to meet current needs and provide the best care. The VA continued to expand the Norwood VA Medical Center until 1981, when the campus had 55 buildings. An extensive survey was done in 1981 of all the existing buildings on the site. It was determined that most were too damaged to repair, as the cost outweighed the benefit. Medical treatments and VA hospitals had also changed how they operated, and fewer employees were housed on the campus, and open land was not as much of a priority. A large new facility was built, and the existing buildings were either torn down, repurposed if the cost was not too great, or left empty. The Lenwood Hospital has sat empty until 2008, when Building 18 was rehabilitated for Veterans' housing that was a part of Freedom's Path Augusta I and II.

The interior of Building 19 will be rehabilitated into 42 affordable Veteran housing units comprised of 25 studio apartments and 17 one-bedrooms. Building 20 will be rehabilitated into 34 units comprised of 22 studio apartments and 12 one-bedrooms. All units will have a leasing preference being provided to Veterans who are homeless, near homeless, or disabled, who meet the income guidelines of the program.

Veterans with a HUD-VASH Housing Choice Voucher will be given a Housing First preference, meaning that typical underwriting that might preclude the Veteran from being able to access standard rental housing (e.g. job history, criminal record, prior rental history) will be relaxed. The criterion for admission will be predicated on their selection for a Voucher by the administering Augusta Housing Authority.

It has been shown that Veterans living with other Veterans, in proximity to the panoply of VA services that are available to them via immediate access to the VA Medical Center that an on-campus housing option affords to them has a remarkable success rate regarding remaining in permanent housing and moving forward with education, employment and life enrichment activities. This is the model of housing and services, both VA and non-VA provided, that is being emulated here.

**Analysis:**

Charlie Norwood VAMC Redevelopment Plan is a plan committed to improving the Charlie Norwood VAMC campus and the surrounding community, by increasing the supply of affordable housing for United States military Veterans and improving the quality of life for all current and future Veterans within the City of Augusta and by ensuring that the communities in proximity to the Charlie Norwood VAMC are included and enhanced by that redevelopment.

**Financial Impact:**

There is no financial commitment on the part of Augusta-Richmond County.

**Alternatives:**

Deny this approval request.

**Recommendation:**

Motion to approve the Charlie Norwood VAMC Revitalization Plan as presented by Freedom's Path Augusta III, LP.

**Funds are available in the following accounts:**

There is no financial commitment on the part of Augusta-Richmond County, however Augusta, GA Commission (c/o city) approval needed for DCA application approval.

**REVIEWED AND  
APPROVED BY:**

Procurement  
Finance  
Law  
Administrator  
Clerk of Commission