When the first 51 homeless US veterans were given the keys to their own housing co-op last month, it was a potent sign of how the movement can transform people’s lives.

The co-op, in Agawam, Massachusetts, offers its new residents not just a roof over their heads, but a new start and a range of services to support them on their journey.

It is the second Gordon H. Mansfield Veterans’ Community to open in the state, with the first opened in nearby Pittsfield, in 2010. They are limited equity co-operatives set up by local veterans organisation, Soldier On.

The Pittsfield co-op provides housing for 39 veterans in a community of all newly built housing. Members must invest $2,500 to obtain a share in the co-op when they join – a problem for many homeless ex-servicemen. Fortunately, Soldier On has worked with a number credit unions and banks to create a pool of funds. Those dollars can be donated or lent to prospective members.

When he moved in to Agawam, Anthony Wilson, told his case manager: “Walking into my unit brought tears to my eyes. This is my home and no one can take that away from me.”

For Soldier On, based in Northampton, Massachusetts, the Agawam co-op was a key chapter at the end of a near ten-year struggle to establish the site as a veterans’ community.

When the team set their eyes on the empty former home of the Western Massachusetts Regional Police Academy it was love at first sight. It had classic architecture of white columns highlighting the stately four-storey building and the seven acres of landscaped open space. It would surely be an uplifting palace for poverty-stricken veterans.

The site was given to Soldier On by the State of Massachusetts for $1 in 2010, when state Lt. Gov. Timothy P. Murray said it was “a generational responsibility” to help the nation’s veterans.

State Rep. Rosemary Sandlin, D-Agawam, who initiated the project and filed the state bill to allow for the sale of the property for $1, characterised the project as “a hand up, not a handout”.

At the time, it was expected that the veterans would move in two years later – but delays meant it would not be until September 2017 that the Academy was re-opened as a permanent, supportive and sustainable community. A dedication ceremony last month signalled the successful move in.

Just prior to the September dedication ceremony, I spoke to Bruce Buckley, chief executive of Soldier On, about the Agawam project.

He said: “One of the key foundations is that every programme begins with a human relationship and that through professional support and service, Soldier On would help build a sense of community where the resident veterans would take ownership.”

Numerous federal, state and local officials took part in the September dedication ceremony. After all, funds to make the community a reality were given by many different hands.

The development consists of 47 one-bedroom apartments of 475 sq ft each, and four studios. Each
has been supplied with a TV that also serves as a computer, which is tied into a Soldier On service desk where the resident veterans can get immediate help and support through Skype or text.

Although these dual-purpose units are expensive to put in, Soldier On feels they will be important not only to deal with emergencies or medical alerts but also to build community and announce activities. Isolation is a major source of depression for veterans and dealing with this problem that in real time will bring positive health impacts.

Homeless veterans who meet HUD VASH (HUD Veterans Affairs Supportive Housing) and low-income housing credit income thresholds are eligible to be members. The monthly carrying charge or rent is set at one third of their income.

Once they have moved in there are number of communal facilities. Mr Buckley said: “We have two patios with gas grills, a dining area for special events and social events, a 15x30 greenhouse open to all, two laundry rooms two onsite office rooms, and a converted auditorium that houses two units with the remainder being used as a library and/or meeting room.”

He added: “We make every effort to use our resources to maximise the number of apartments for veterans and we make use of all of the space. The path to permanent, independent living from institutional living requires a conscious effort to form independent relationships. We promote socialising by choice in individual apartments, as most of us do, with community events being promoted with people outside of the formerly homeless veteran community, and those in the community that fits ones interests and lifestyle.”

The organisational structure of the Gordon Mansfield Agawam Veterans’ Village means the property is owned for the first 15 years by Agawam Veterans Village LLC, which used state and federal historic tax credits to obtain the equity financing.

Gordon Mansfield Veterans’ Village Cooperative-Agawam is the limited equity co-op, which is the non-profit partner in the project. After the charter board, the intent is for the co-op to have four to five members elected by the residents and one or two board members appointed to the board from the Agawam community.

It is named after Gordon Mansfield, a former deputy secretary of Veterans Affairs, a highly decorated Army veteran who survived two tours of duty in Vietnam. As company commander of the 101st Airborne Division, Mansfield sustained a spinal cord injury during the 1968 Tet Offensive, for which he received the Distinguished Service Cross — the second-highest personal decoration for valor in combat.

Soldier On President, John “Jack” Downing, conceived and spearheaded the program for limited equity housing. Just before the dedication, he said. “Agawam is a community that many of our people would be comfortable living in,” he said. “It offers a lot of supportive services, and this building is on rural property that allows our veterans to live together and do very, very well.”

Many groups involved in housing veterans are beginning to take a look at the Soldier On’s veteran’s co-operative housing program that promotes ownership and involvement.

These two new housing co-ops are not the first of their kind but there should be many more. After World War II housing co-ops gave a home to veterans and their families, helping them to rebuild their lives.

In an amazing national effort, 46 housing co-ops for veterans were built in 15 states providing 14,721 units of co-operative housing for 50,000 people.