

Meeting the housing need: DePaul has substantial presence in GLOW region, state as supportive living organization

By Mike Pettinella For The Daily News
Sep 28, 2024

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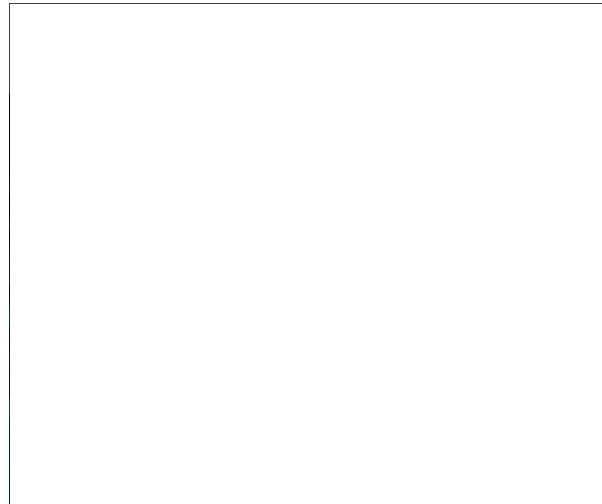


DePaul opened La Rose Villas on Mill Street in Le Roy in 2020.

When Mark Fuller took over as the administrator of DePaul in 1978, the nonprofit agency — then affiliated with the Diocese of Rochester’s Catholic Charities program — was on life support.

“When I came on board, they basically said stop it from bleeding money and just do something,” the longtime Le Roy resident said. “So, I actually talked to Dr. (Charles) Lesh and said, ‘What am I going to do to save this?’ ”

The late Dr. Lesh was a staff psychiatrist at Genesee County Mental Health at the time. He served as an adviser during Fuller's employment at the county nursing home prior to Fuller taking the position at DePaul.



During a sit-down interview at LaRosa Villas, a 55-and-over apartment building in Le Roy last week, Fuller shared that Dr. Lesh advised him “to find a niche and get into group homes.”

“It goes back to Geraldo Rivera and his expose in the late 1970s on how bad the psychiatric and developmental disability facilities were and also how the state was looking to cut money ... so they started the whole group home movement,” Fuller said. “So we really got into, at that time, group homes and we started building bigger ones. Then we started doing senior living, assisted living, and then we developed affordable housing projects.”

Formed as a child guidance clinic for children in Rochester's parochial school system in 1958, the DePaul Group, Inc. has expanded to serve more than 5,000 people in 15 New York counties in the affordable housing, mental health residential, senior living and veterans' sectors. It employs about 1,000 people and has an annual operating budget of \$120 million.

DePaul, headquartered on Buffalo Road in Rochester, has forged a strong presence in the GLOW region, with facilities in Batavia, Le Roy, Albion, Perry, Geneseo and Warsaw and another coming soon in Dansville.

Fuller – with more than 46 years as administrator, executive director and president – and his management team have achieved exponentially more than just “stopping the bleeding.”

From lock washers to mental health

Fuller entered the workforce in the early 1970s, taking a job at Eaton Corporation in Batavia.

“I worked there for four years right out of college and became the world’s leading expert on flat and spring loaded washers. Let me tell you how popular that made me at the nightclubs in the old days,” Fuller said. “I used to go to Alex’s and say, ‘I’m your guy if you need a lock washer.’”

Deciding he needed something more, Fuller said he went to Rochester Institute of Technology and earned a master’s degree in business administration.

“My mom was in healthcare, so I grew up around healthcare. She was a nurse. I wanted to work at a nursing home or nursing hospital; something like that,” he said.

In 1976, he interviewed for what he called an “assistant assistant” administrator position at Genesee County Nursing Home.

“I knew I’d have to take a pay cut, but I said I got to make at least half of what I made before and I just spent whatever it was to get an MBA, and they couldn’t match it. So the next day, I get a call from a guy named Dr. Charlie Lesh,” he said.

Fuller said Lesh needed an administrator at the mental health office, but that job didn’t appeal to him at first.

“I told him that I didn’t know much about mental health and that’s not what I want,” Fuller said. “Dr. Lesh responded, ‘What do you have to lose? Come in and spend an hour with me.’”

That meeting with Lesh proved to be a game-changer, said Fuller, who grew up in Warsaw, but was living in Batavia at the time

“He basically sold me on (the premise that) everything I wanted to do, I could do in mental health – the budgets, working with the legislature, a one-stop shop,” Fuller recalled. “He didn’t want to do it as a psychiatrist. And to be honest, Genesee County never knew how good they had it for what they were paying him (as a mental health clinic staff psychiatrist).

“I worked for him for about 18 months and I learned more from him during that time than I learned in 25 years of schooling.”

Soon thereafter, Lesh went into private practice, prompting Fuller to leave the mental health agency as well.

“I interviewed at DePaul, and when I started, there were 22 employees and negative \$1,000 in the checkbook,” he said. “I was going to stay three or four years, and now we’ve got a thousand staff positions and more than 60 sites across the state. I guess I screwed up (my plan of) staying three to four years, but I’ve loved every minute of it.”

Restoring old and building new

Fuller said he fields telephone calls on a regular basis from local government officials in need of affordable housing for their residents.

In 1996, four years after severing ties with the Diocese of Rochester, DePaul established a relationship with Living Opportunities of Western New York, Inc., adding Genesee, Orleans and Wyoming counties to DePaul’s service area.

Fuller pointed to the La Rosa Villas site on Mill Street in Le Roy as a prime example of what can be done with a rundown structure — in this case, a former Lapp Insulator building.

“I get calls all the time for projects and I always say that the hardest thing is finding a site,” Fuller said. “You got environmental issues with locations. And I’m driving by this site all the time (he and his wife, the former Michele Rapone and family reside in Le Roy) doing projects here from Buffalo to Albany and I thought, ‘What a beautiful site.’ This old, ugly building was falling down and the creek nearby. And I said, ‘Let’s do a project here.’”

Fuller said Le Roy Mayor Greg Rogers and the village board supported the idea, and in 2020, the 60-unit affordable housing facility opened for residents 55 years of age and older, with on-site supportive services available for 30 of those tenants.

DePaul’s Batavia Apartments on East Main Street in the city was constructed 2009 with 42 units and since has expanded with the addition of 20 Empire State Supportive Housing Initiative units for income-eligible tenants. Recently, the site was renamed to the Charles J. Lesh, MD Apartments in honor of the man who served as Fuller’s mentor.

In Orleans County, DePaul owns and operates the picturesque Boxcar Apartments, a 40-unit affordable housing and ESSHI facility that opened in 2021, and the Crimson Heights apartment treatment program.

In Wyoming County, the Knitting Mill Apartments represent a rehabilitation effort of the former Perry Knitting Company in 2019. The facility has 48 affordable housing and ESSHI units.

“That business actually was called the Nitey Nite Company. They made one-piece nighties for toddlers,” Fuller said. “The Perry mayor, Rick Hauser, called me and said he had the perfect site. And it worked out very well.”

DePaul also has an apartment treatment program site in Warsaw.

In Livingston County, the Skybird Landing Apartments in Geneseo opened in 2019. The property is a 60-unit affordable housing and ESSHI facility with 30 of those units set aside as supportive housing to assist individuals to live independently in the community.

DePaul is awaiting funding for the restoration of King’s Daughters Apartments in Dansville and, if approved, a 2026 opening is expected. Another Dansville project is the development of the Balloon Lofts, a 48-unit community that already has received federal funding and ESSHI funds.

Fuller said the DePaul properties – stretching from Schenectady County to Niagara County – offer a range of services, including crisis housing and treatment sites.

“We’ve got some that are just group homes for people that are mentally ill and some that have both mental health and drug addiction problems,” Fuller explained. “But the affordable are typically a mix of low income and then people with special needs of some sort. Batavia has got low income and people with mental health problems, same with Perry and Albion. So most are some type of mixed housing.”

DePaul’s properties are tax exempt, Fuller acknowledged, but are subject to a payment in lieu of taxes schedule set up by local Industrial Development Agencies, for example.

“We always pay a PILOT,” he said. “It’s always more than what they’re getting as either empty land or an old building or something.”

Handling opposition to low-income housing

When asked about opposition to these types of facilities, Fuller simply said, “I’ve got so many towns that call me so, for the most part, I don’t do projects if they don’t want me.”

He did mention that a project on East Main Street in Batavia – on a site that included the former New York State Police barracks – was turned down about seven years ago but commended Batavia leaders for being supportive.

Fuller said that he often has to educate local government boards about DePaul’s reputation as a “good neighbor.”

“I’d say, for the last 15 to 20 years, our reputation speaks for itself,” he said. “The best predictor of future behavior is past behavior. So, we show them the projects. We tell them pick a project and call the mayor.

“We were doing a project in Lockport and they had like eight people on City Council or whatever it is and five or six of them were against it. So now they delay it. We got another meeting in 30 days. In the 30 days, two of the people went and visited two of our sites, and they called somebody who knew a neighbor who had a doctor that lived in the area of Buffalo, where one of the sites are.



“They walked in and said, ‘Your facilities look great and they’re well managed.’ The doctor told them that it was the best running facility in the community. We still had two people vote against because I don’t think there was anything we could have done. But enough people changed their minds and we

won the vote.”

Fuller said the testimonials he receives from tenants encourages him to keep going.

“We had a really tough project in Port Byron – one of my toughest and I wasn’t sleeping nights,” he said. “I would wake up at 2:30 in the morning. That was one of the hardest ones ever. But then we opened and I had one lady come up and hug me... and said I’ve lived in my car for two years, and I’ve never had a nice apartment. She cried and thanked me.”

Beyond finding locations and facing those opposed to low-income housing, Fuller said a huge challenge is filling the numerous employment opportunities at DePaul.

“We have about 150 openings right now,” he said. “Counselors, housekeepers, security, administrative staff, accounting, communications, quality assurance, recreation, senior living.

“Staffing is a big challenge; finding the right staff, enough staff, quality staff. And money is a challenge, too. With COVID and inflation, reimbursements haven’t gone up.”

Fuller said it’s “a stretch” to say that DePaul is in a financially strong position right now.

“Tenants pay from 30 to 60 percent of their income for rent, and most people are on just SSI (Supplemental Security Income) or Supplemental Security Disability,” he said. “(Reimbursement) rates haven’t gone up in five years. I would say the finances are tougher now than they’ve ever been.”

Fuller, now 72, said his motivation to fill the housing needs across the state is as strong as ever.

“I put about 60,000 miles a year on my car,” he said. “I want to get to 50 years, then we’ll talk about it (retirement). I love what I do. And I tell the staff, if they see my slipping, let me know. But as long as I keep getting calls every day, I’ll keep going.”