

Customer Success Story

COMMERCIAL: NORTHERN VIRGINIA FAMILY SERVICES SERVE SHELTER



“John's architectural design of the new wing of the SERVE shelter has completed a lot of hopes and dreams that people have had for many years. And, he did it in an amazing way. He listened to dozens of different disjointed conversations, but he heard what the essence of this project needed to be and he delivered it in a way that really takes your breath away. The final result conveys dignity, hope, compassion, and respect.”

— Cheri Villa, COO,
Northern Virginia Family Services

Company Overview

Established in 1924, each year Northern Virginia Family Service (NVFS) - a private, nonprofit community service organization - helps 33,000 individuals and families find new paths to self-reliance and brighter futures. NVFS provides case management, safe housing, counseling, medical and dental access, child care and development, affordable loans, foster and respite care and job training to families in need. Recently, NVFS merged with SERVE, the Manassas campus of Northern Virginia Family Service. SERVE is unique for its holistic approach to helping the community's most vulnerable individuals and families address a variety of needs on their paths to self-sufficiency.

Challenge

In the past decade, NVFS noticed a dramatic shift in the needs of the homeless in Northern Virginia. Previously, those seeking help were mainly single parents with one child. Perhaps directly related to the recession, after 2006, that changed to families with five or more children. The current shelter just wasn't designed to accommodate families of that size, with children of various ages. And, it certainly didn't allow for privacy or a safe and inviting place for children to play.

Overview

In 1998, NVFS engaged John Heltzel to design the original shelter at SERVE, a five-acre campus comprising three buildings including a distribution, administration, and family emergency center. By 2010, recognizing the changing patterns of homelessness, the decision was made to renovate the center. NVFS didn't hesitate to call on John again. Familiar with his long-term commitment and passion for serving the community, John was a natural go-to person for the job.

The two-year project included renovations of portions of the existing shelter as well as a 4k square-foot addition. The addition included eight family room suites, bathroom facilities, and a warm and inviting common space, with a fireplace acting as a focal point to the new design. The design incorporated a unique “swing room” that allowed multiple configurations of family bedrooms, from one to three bedrooms combined.

Cheri noted, “The new layout enables parents to put their small children to bed, while keeping a watchful eye on them, and provides children access to closer bathroom facilities. As with

hotel rooms, the rooms now open up to make larger suites, helping families manage their personal situations in a much more dignified way. Add to that the importance of play—John added a large, safe section between the buildings for tricycles, and open play.”

Before

- Designed to accommodate single men, women, and small families, the original building did not include private space for in-tact families
- Existing space could not accommodate areas where families can relax together outside of their bedrooms
- Original layout did not allow for specialized areas for children such as the study room and art and crafts area
- Bedrooms did not allow sufficient room for desks, closets or bathing facilities

After

- Renovation enables increased bed capacity, from 60 to 92 enabling more families to be served
- Additional space allows for more staff space and support-services.
- Renovation to existing space matches changing needs of homeless
- New design affords more flexibility and privacy to families
- Final result allows families to stay better focused on their goals and work more independently towards housing solutions

Benefits

- Expansion provides adequate space for additional training opportunities
- Average shelter stay reduced from over 90 days to 45 days
- Family Emergency Shelter helps 250 more individuals each year find safe and stable housing - 40% of clients served are children

