

Augusta nonprofit home updating mission to help more female veterans

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By Keith Edwards

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Maeghan Maloney, left, and Rebecca Cornell du Houx chat in the living room after a tour Wednesday of the Betsy Ann Ross House of Hope in Augusta. Maloney is the local district attorney and a new board member, while Cornell du Houx is director of the program, which is expanding its mission to serve all female veterans and not just those who are homeless or in need. — Joe Phelan/Kennebec Journal

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Cornell du Houx, a former president of its board of directors and a licensed social worker, envisions the home providing support in a variety of ways to women, something she said many male veterans have, but that is hard to come by for the increasing number of women in the military.

“If a woman veteran needs something we’ll try to support them, whether that means reconnecting them with veterans’ services or opening a bed for them,” said Cornell du Houx, who holds a master’s degree in clinical social work and has served in the Maine National Guard for 18 years, and currently serves as a lieutenant and a behavioral health officer for the guard. “We’re shifting from only homeless female veterans to all women vets and their

children, to encompass multiple other resources, including legal support, therapy, group support, substance use disorder support, whatever women veterans come in and say they need support with, we want to provide. There's not a lot of support for women veterans out there."

The nonprofit that runs the home, which is at 8 Summer St. in Augusta, began a reorganization last year after its founder and former executive director, Martha St. Pierre, left the organization. As part of that change, the remaining leaders of the organization stopped taking in female veterans at the home, until they had time to reorganize.

Four women staying at the home then who didn't want to leave at the time have since found new and more permanent housing with help from House of Hope, Cornell du Houx said.

Cornell du Houx stepped in as executive director this year and said the home recently reopened and is once again able to provide temporary housing. Now, though, there is no one staying at the home because no women have expressed interest in moving in, she said.



The exterior view of the Betsy Ann Ross House of Hope in Augusta is seen on Thursday. *Joe Phelan/Kennebec Journal*

Cornell du Houx, who has a full-time job outside the home, said the organization is seeking to raise money to be able to hire someone to oversee the house and someone to serve as a resource coordinator to be available to help female veterans during regular business hours. For now the house is not regularly staffed. Female veterans looking to connect for help or who seek to stay at the home may contact Cornell du Houx at 207-530-0466.

Maeghan Maloney, district attorney for Kennebec and Somerset counties, who is slated to become a board member of the House of Hope, said the change and expanded mission “is wonderful.”

“The more hope we can provide, to more people, the better,” Maloney said.

Cornell du Houx anticipates the organization will change its name to reflect its expanded mission, potentially to “Sisters in Arms Center,” though the organization’s board has not yet considered the name change.

Sisters in Arms is also part of the name of a new support group, Strong Bonds for our Sisters in Arms, which is scheduled to have its first meeting at the home at 6 p.m. Saturday.

Cornell du Houx and Sgt. Aleigh Suffern formed the new group in the wake of recent reports of sexual assault and harassment of women within the Maine National Guard.

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“If a woman veteran is assaulted or doesn’t feel safe or just wants to be with other women vets who’ll be there for her, the doors are always open for them,” Cornell du Houx said of both the support group and home. “The support group is an opportunity for us to get together and connect. The experience of harassment or assault is so incredibly isolating. These women, a lot of them are nurses and medics, have historically saved lives, they’re some of the most amazing people I’ve met in my life. Male veterans have an incredibly strong network, female veterans don’t. That’s unfortunate and that’s what I want to build here. A network where we can all support each other.”

Maloney said something she plans to offer the group is her experience as a district attorney and confidentiality. She said she’ll offer, as she has to other groups in the past, a chance to speak to her anonymously about any questions or concerns they might have, including whether something that happened to them is against the law and what their options are if they wish to pursue criminal charges.

“It’s such an important organization, especially thinking about female guardsmen and the articles we’ve seen published regarding sexual assault,” Maloney said. “What I’m able to offer to people in the guard through the House of Hope is an opportunity to meet with me, not give their name, and just tell me what they’ve gone through. I can discuss the law with them, as many victims are not sure if what happened to them is against the law. And some victims, when they know the law, are ready to go ahead with criminal charges.”

Cornell du Houx said female veterans are twice as likely to commit suicide than their male peers. But she said female veterans are also more resilient to PTSD and more likely to accept help and work with support systems to develop ways to manage their symptoms.

“So if we fill that gap, if we provide those resources to our women veterans, I feel like this could be a pretty amazing demographic to serve,” Cornell du Houx said. “To be able to provide this center, provide these supports to them, provides a place that’s safe where they

don't have to worry about confidentiality issues or there being repercussions. I think this could be a model for future centers throughout the country. It's a niche that's missing within our community."

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