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First of its kind home for those on ventilators opens in Chelsea

by [Ethan M. Forman](#) – December 10, 2020

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Patrick O'Brien, left, and Steve Saling, two longtime Leonard Florence Center for Living residents, at the Tribeca Film Festival in New York City in 2015. O'Brien has been living on a ventilator at the Leonard Florence Center for the past 10 years, and during that time produced a documentary, "Transfatty Lives," that won the Audience Award at the Tribeca Film Festival.

CHELSEA – In the middle of the coronavirus crisis, Chelsea Jewish Lifecare answered the call from the state to create a first of its kind homelike setting for those who are dependent on a ventilator to breathe.

Chelsea Jewish Lifecare's Leonard Florence Center for Living on Admiral Hill has opened the Stein Family Center for Well-Being with two new homes totaling 20 private rooms to provide care in a comfortable residential setting for those who need ventilators.

In an agreement with the state, the Chelsea nonprofit will accept people who have stabilized in acute care and need long-term placement including those who were placed on ventilators because of the pandemic and don't have 24/7 care at home.

Unlike a typical nursing home setting, the Leonard Florence Center consists of 10 7,000-square-foot condominium-style "homes" on six floors that care for both short- and long-term care residents. Many previously on ventilators have amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, a progressive neurodegenerative disease. It's

called a “Green House” model of care because each home has 10 private rooms with comfortable furniture and private baths that are grouped around a common living area with a fireplace, open kitchen, and dining room with access to other amenities.

The Stein Family Center has been equipped with 25 state-of-the-art multifunction portable ventilators that are simple to use and manage, providing greater mobility for residents, and an improved quality of life.

On Dec. 3, officials of Chelsea Jewish Lifecare cut the ribbon on the Stein Family Center with speakers taking part via Zoom. The center also was welcomed by Chelsea City Manager Thomas Ambrosino, with virtual video participation by Mary Lou Sudders, the state’s Secretary of Health and Human Services.

Sudders praised the care offered at the Leonard Florence Center and said: “Once again, you responded to the call for specialized care during this pandemic. The pandemic has had a devastating impact on older adults and individuals with compromised health conditions.”

“Together,” Sudders said, “we’ve worked to strengthen long-term care. You took the initiative and dedicated a unit for COVID-positive patients to recover and to receive care. And more recently, you answered the call, a call of need, to create 20 private rooms for individuals who are [dependent on a ventilator]. That is why we come together.”

“I’m so very excited to think that the state of Massachusetts thinks so highly of our organization to choose us to participate in this endeavor,” said Gilda Richman, chairwoman of the Chelsea Jewish Lifecare board and a longtime employee.

“We are just honored and we are blessed that the Commonwealth of Massachusetts selected us. We will never let them down and we never let down the 20 individuals that are coming to live with us,” said Barry Berman, Chelsea Jewish Lifecare’s CEO.

The Leonard Florence Center has experience caring for those living on ventilators.

Ten years ago, during the “the miracle of Hanukkah,” Berman said, the first resident living on a ventilator was admitted to their ALS home. Patrick O’Brien is still living at the center 10 years later. During his stay, O’Brien has visited the White House, Disney World, and with technology controlled solely by eye movement produced and directed a documentary that won awards at the Tribeca and Milano film festivals. He formerly lived in a nursing home setting where he could not get out of bed, Berman said.

“This year really wasn’t a miracle,” Berman said of 2020. Instead, it was the surprise call from state officials.

“And the call was to ask us if we would consider opening a couple of our houses, Green Houses, to people ... on ventilators,” Berman said. “And the call immediately had a certain tone to it that was so unique. It was not a call of regulators calling a provider. It was really a call, a very concerned group of individuals that really wanted to find a way to help many more individuals on ventilators.”

Berman said after the call, he gathered a management team together and they sprang into action before they even signed contracts with Medicaid.

The two houses they opened to create the Stein Family Center were not scheduled to be rehabbed, Berman said, “but we also decided that there was no way in the world we were going to let this specialized population move in to something that was not absolutely pristine and brand new.”

The carpets and floors were ripped up and replaced, and every inch of the center was repainted, he said.

That the center had to be special was important to Berman, who reflected on the time he visited with a quadriplegic on a ventilator in a skilled nursing home to get a sense of the care that would be required before the Steve Saling ALS Residence at Leonard Florence Center for Living was opened.

He recalled sitting next to the person, who never left his bed, and seeing a rusted radiator baseboard, a window with a broken seal that had fogged over, and buckling floor tiles in the corner.

“And I sat there and I said to myself, ‘Welcome to hell.’ I was so rattled to this day my core is still rattled by what I saw. I knew ours would be different, but we made it a very, very, very special for people to live,” Berman said.

The Leonard Florence Center gives vented residents hope for a meaningful life in a place where they are able to get out of bed, take a shower, and leave the building, Berman said. One individual living in the Stein Family Center also has asked if he could go camping, Berman said.

Michael McCarthy, the executive director of the Leonard Florence Center, said the state identified Chelsea Jewish Lifecare as an organization that could meet the growing need to care for those people living on a ventilator. Work began in July to convert 20 former short-term stay rooms, add oxygen and sucking piping in each room, hire and train staff, and bring in new furniture and coordinate admissions from other facilities. The first vented resident moved in on Nov. 23.

The new center honors Bill and Sharon Stein and their family for their support of the Leonard Florence Center over the past five years, including their financial support to open a second ALS house at the center.

“Sharon and I are honored and humbled to be recognized today,” said Bill Stein via Zoom, “this really means a lot, and it’s been quite remarkable to watch the evolution of this amazing facility, really from one specialty care home with just 10 beds, to what it is now, which is the preeminent specialty care facility in the country, really.”