

# BANKER & TRADESMAN

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## Caritas Communities Expands Portfolio With Chelsea Purchase

By Aglaia Pikounis

**A** BRAINTREE-BASED NONPROFIT GROUP HAS purchased a rooming house in Chelsea as part of its ongoing expansion.

Caritas Communities, which maintains over 600 single-room occupancy units in Greater Boston, recently purchased 423-425 Eastern Ave. in Chelsea for \$875,000. Caritas had been searching for a Chelsea property to purchase for several years.

"We've been looking at a variety of opportunities because we're very interested in expanding our operations in Chelsea," said Caritas Executive Director Mark J. Winkeller.

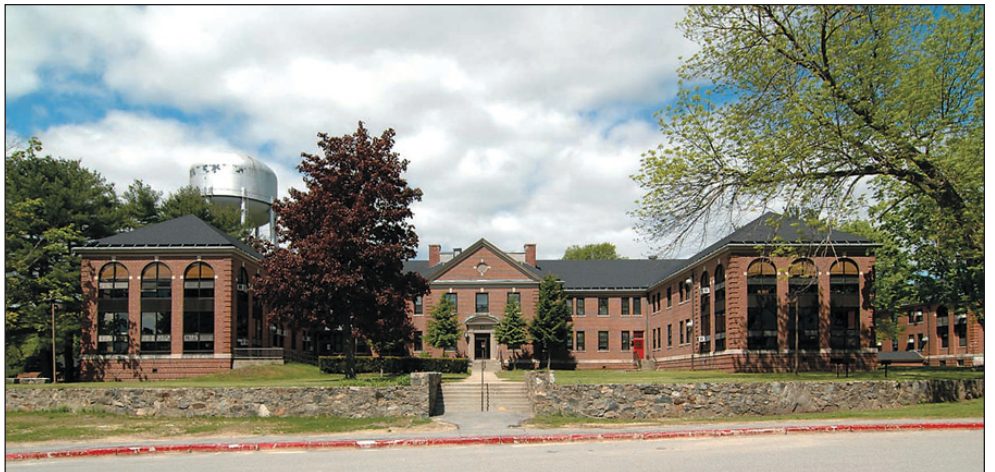
Caritas Communities is the first nonprofit organization to own a rooming house in the city. Chelsea has nine licensed rooming houses with a total of 185 units, according to Carol Ridge-Martinez, Chelsea's director of housing.

"We are happy to be the first nonprofit to enter the [Chelsea] market," said Winkeller, noting that as a nonprofit, his group is committed to preserving the long-term affordability of the rooms.

Lodging houses primarily serve single adults with low incomes who rent rooms on a weekly or monthly basis. Tenants typically share kitchen and bathroom facilities. Rooming houses traditionally have been a housing option for people with low-paying jobs who are at risk of becoming homeless or those transitioning from homelessness.

The Chelsea building was licensed as a 13-unit rooming house, but Caritas Communities received a special permit from Chelsea's Zoning Board of Appeals last May to expand it to 21 rooms. The group also got permission to add a common kitchen and two bathrooms.

The building currently has 12 rooms on the third floor and a large apartment on



**Caritas Communities, a Braintree-based nonprofit, has continued to grow its portfolio of rooming houses. This 60-room property in Bedford, which was finished last summer, is for homeless veterans.**

the second floor. A restaurant occupies the first floor. Winkeller said the second floor is being renovated into nine rooms.

City officials are supportive of Caritas' entry into the city.

"They've got a great reputation. They manage their units very well. They're doing a great deal of renovation of the units so they'll be much better than what's there," said Ridge-Martinez.

Both Ridge-Martinez and Winkeller said there is a need for such housing in Chelsea.

"People have a hard time finding a good, well-run, decent single-room occupancy unit that they can afford, so for us this is a very positive thing," she said. "People double up and have roommates and you end up with people crowded up in small apartments because they can't afford an apartment of their own. This is something that I think will rent up pretty quickly."

### 'Badly Neglected'

The Chelsea acquisition is the latest in a

string of purchases over the last 18 months for the nonprofit. Last September, Caritas purchased a 17-room lodging house on Alaska Street in Roxbury. Winkeller said Caritas is seeking state and city funding to renovate it. Once the group secures funding, it plans to begin renovations immediately, he said.

"It's a property that had been badly neglected by the prior owner," Winkeller said of the Roxbury site.

Caritas also purchased a vacant nursing home on Vine Street in Melrose in August 2006. The property will be converted into a 14-room lodging house with private bathrooms for the tenants. Winkeller said the building is located in an area that is legally zoned for lodging-house use. Caritas has applied for state funding and hopes to start construction as early as this spring.

And just last summer, Caritas completed a 60-room property in Bedford for homeless veterans. The rooming house is located in a building on the campus of the Edith Nourse Rogers Memorial Veterans Hospital. ■