

# Fight for the Montrose VA Continues

The U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs says that veterans' services at Montrose will not be cut or relocated this year, but that it is continuing to review private development proposals. Opponents continue their fight.

- By [Laura Belfiore](#)



For the past few years, many veterans that receive services at the Department of Veterans Affairs Hudson Valley Healthcare System in Montrose have been filled with a discomforting uncertainty about the hospital's future.

The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) says that services at the Montrose campus will not be cut or relocated in the year 2011, but it is still looking to allow private development on more than 100 acres of the 180-acre campus under the Enhanced-Use Lease Program (EUL).

The EUL enables the VA "to select an organization through a competitive process to put underutilized and vacant land and buildings to use to improve services to veterans," said Nancy Winter, spokeswoman for the Franklin Delano Roosevelt Campus of the Department of Veterans Affairs Hudson Valley Healthcare System at Montrose.

But opponents of the EUL say that the "underutilized and vacant" land belongs to veterans and should be used to enhance and expand the government provided services offered to them.

The VA's plans are to enter into a 75-year lease agreement with a private developer that will use the land to "provide new housing opportunities for veterans, such as senior housing, assisted living and housing for homeless or at-risk veterans and their families," according to Winter.

Veterans, local politicians and state legislators say that the developers would first build luxury condos, which few veterans would be able to afford, and then possibly commercial buildings. Affordable housing for veterans would actually be last on the list. This would force veterans into

using other VA facilities to receive the free services they have been getting from the Montrose campus for more than 60 years.

The Department of Veterans Affairs is suggesting services be relocated to the Castle Point campus in Dutchess County and to Rockland. But many veterans choose the Montrose hospital because of its convenient location and proximity to a train station (right across the street). Moving services further up state would be a major inconvenience for those who cannot afford challenges such as finding and paying for transportation to more distant sites.

“It is not practical to relocate services to other locations since the Montrose campus is centrally located, being at the northernmost part of Westchester County, close to Rockland and Putnam Counties, the Bronx and Connecticut, and just 20 minutes from West Point,” said Robert Ferguson, a veteran and retired employee of the hospital’s Engineering Department.

“Other facilities, such as the Bronx VA and Castle Point do not have the parking space for veterans and their families to utilize services or visit patients,” he added.

If the EUL is successfully put into effect, the hospital’s resources would be facing additional dramatic downsizes to ones they have already suffered, like the closing of the pool and the theater.

Ferguson also serves on the Montrose Action Committee (MAC) and as a volunteer with the Cortlandt Community Volunteer Ambulance Corps (the 911-response ambulance for the Montrose VA). He frequently interacts with patients and employees of the Montrose campus who are worried about the economic impact of the EUL.

“Many current, longstanding employees are fearful that they will lose their jobs with a downsizing of the hospital.”

Leasing the land for private development will not only cause job losses and service cuts, but will prevent the location from being used as a hub for many much-needed new programs and resources for the country’s veterans.

Cortlandt Town Supervisor, Linda Puglisi, describes the plan as “outrageous.”

“The VA hospital should become a hub for vets,” said Puglisi, who explained that her father was a veteran who taught her the importance of taking care of our service men and women.

“We’ve been lobbying every politician for seven years. Their acronym for the project is CARES, which is ironic because we don’t think it seems like they care at all,” said Puglisi.

The hospital was opened in the 1950s and veterans have been taking advantage of the aid it offers since. Some World War II veterans even live on the campus.

Puglisi and other opponents of the VA’s plans argue that the Montrose campus can and should become a facility that promotes the physical and mental health of our veterans. They say this

would serve the Department of Veterans Affairs and veterans' best interests, considering that New York State has one of the nation's highest veteran populations.

Cortlandt Manor resident and Commander of Chapter 21 of the Military Order of the Purple Heart, William Nazario sees the Montrose campus as being a vital asset to the veteran community. He has been another active voice in the struggle to maintain and revitalize the VA hospital.

Nazario, who compares the prospect of building private housing on the hundred plus acres to, "building a Walmart in a bird sanctuary," believes that the beauty of Montrose's location is critical to the hospital's ability to treat those veterans suffering from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.

"[Montrose] is presently, for the most part, a mental health hospital. The tranquility there is an important component of the treatment of PTSD & other health issues," said Nazario. "Commercialization brings civilians, and hustle & bustle, which is not conducive to the recovery process of the patients."

Nazario also pointed out that there has been an increase in both male and female veterans returning home from the current war that have been affected by some type of Military Sexual Trauma and Traumatic Brain Injury.

While it is an unfortunate reality, these statistics add yet another possibility to Montrose's future; in addition to treating PTSD, the facility would also be a sensible place to treat MST and TBI as well.

"The Montrose campus is already designated as a VA mental health facility," said Nazario. "It would fill the need for such a service in the tri-state area."

Bringing these services would be a big project that would help to make the Montrose location become the hub that Puglisi and Nazario imagine it should become, but there are smaller scaled projects that they feel can be tackled more immediately.

The restoration of the hospital's swimming pool is one example.

"They let the pool fall apart," said Nazario. "People see a pool, and they think it is just about recreation, but it was used by the veterans for therapy."

To veterans, politicians and much of the surrounding community's dismay, the future of the EUL program and the Montrose campus VA hospital remains at a standstill. Veterans and veteran supporters continue their fight to maintain the land that the hospital, its employees and its patients have called their own for more than 60 years.

In 2010, the Westchester County Board of Legislators passed a resolution on behalf of its veterans, and took a stance against the proposed redevelopment.

Currently, there are multiple resolutions in the works in New York State that are similar to the one passed by the Westchester County Board of Legislators. In each resolution it requests that the Dept. of Veterans Affairs refrain from the private and commercial development of the Montrose facility. The assurance of the continued care of our Veterans accompanies this request.

"We are not letting our guard down," promises Puglisi. "We won't rest until the proper decision is made."