

Transcription:

Ben Dion

You're listening to the **State of Opportunity Podcast**, presented by Fellowship Housing Opportunities, a nonprofit located in Concord, New Hampshire, providing affordable housing for people living with mental illness. I'm your host, Ben Dion, Director of Development and Community Engagement at FHO.

We're excited to bring you this first episode with the Executive Director of Fellowship Housing Opportunities, Herb Carpenter. Herb, thanks for joining us on the podcast today. You were the obvious first guest because you're the Executive Director of FHO. Tell us a little bit about yourself, how you found Fellowship Housing Opportunities, and your relationship with Concord.

Herb Carpenter

Yes. Thank you for having me. It's a pleasure to be the first guest on the new podcast.

I was born and raised here in Concord, New Hampshire, and my wife taught school here in Concord for 40 years, so we're very much connected to the community.

I can remember, as a child, sitting on the curb and watching them tear down homes to build the Blue Cross Blue Shield building over on Pearly Street. Who would have known that someday I would work there? That's where I started my career. I spent a number of years there before the organization eventually moved to Manchester.

Later, I worked at LRG Healthcare in Laconia, which included Franklin Regional Hospital and Lakes Region General Hospital. I worked in provider contracting on behalf of the organization.

While I was there, I became aware of an opportunity to join the Board of Directors at Fellowship Housing Opportunities. In 2006, I joined the board, and that's how I became familiar with the work that Fellowship Housing does, the organization itself, and what it was like working with the individuals we serve.

Ben Dion

So you became Executive Director back in 2020, correct?

Herb Carpenter

Yes. While I was serving on the board, it became my turn to serve as Board Chair. I had just started that role in September 2019 when a couple of key employees gave notice. We knew we needed to address the organization's leadership, and the opportunity to search for a new Executive Director came about.

In December 2020, I stepped down from the board to become the Interim Executive Director. I later applied for the permanent position and was selected. That's when I officially began serving as Executive Director of the organization.

Ben Dion

So you've been with the organization for about six years now. People come and go, employees change, but the mission has stayed the same. Can you talk a little bit about what we do here at Fellowship Housing Opportunities and the people we serve in the greater Concord community?

Herb Carpenter

Absolutely. You're right—the mission has remained the same: to provide safe and affordable housing for individuals living with severe and persistent mental illness. That has been our mission for all 60 years that we've been serving the community.

When I first came to the organization, I thought I could improve processes and make things work better. I quickly discovered that the dedicated staff, the mission, and the work being done were already very strong. Instead, I spent my time learning the day-to-day operations so I could better support the staff.

Although we're a small organization, we've continued to serve approximately 63 residents living in properties throughout Concord. We provide housing while partnering with Riverbend Community Mental Health to ensure residents receive the clinical services they need.

It's been extremely rewarding. I enjoy working in an organization where you can make a difference every day and have an immediate impact. That's one of the greatest benefits of working for a small organization.

Ben Dion

Sixty years is a long time. We just celebrated our 60th anniversary this past June. It was a great celebration with a lot of familiar faces and people reconnecting, which was wonderful to see.

Our former Executive Director, Paige Cannon, attended as well. She served as Executive Director for 32 years, right?

Herb Carpenter

Yes, that's right.

Paige was the first person I worked with when I joined the board. She came to South Congregational Church to speak about Fellowship Housing Opportunities. That's when I learned that South Congregational Church and its members played a significant role in founding what was originally called Opportunity House, creating a residential program in the neighborhood near the church.

The hope was that someone from the church would always serve on the board to maintain that connection. That's what sparked my interest. Paige was an outstanding speaker, and I was very impressed with both her and the work she was doing.

Ben Dion

I always think it's interesting that everyone who works here—and even many of our residents—has a story about how they found Fellowship Housing Opportunities.

My own story started with a job posting. Honestly, I had almost forgotten I had applied. Then I came in to interview with you. I didn't know much about the organization at the time—I probably should have done more homework—but I wanted to learn from you and the organization.

After our conversation, I left thinking, "I don't know if I want this job," but by the time I got home, that had changed to, "I really want to work for this organization."

I think a lot of people have similar experiences. As you'll hear in future episodes, many staff members, community partners, and organizations we collaborate with have similar stories.

One thing I've learned since coming here is how unique the Concord community is. If you could describe Concord in one word, what would it be, and why?

Herb Carpenter

I would describe Concord as **dynamic**.

By that, I mean it's always changing. As the population changes, businesses evolve, and new opportunities emerge, the community reflects those changes. It never stays the same for too long, and I think that's healthy. Communities need to evolve with the times, and Concord has done that well.

Ben Dion

I like that word. I think it describes our organization, too. We come in each day with a plan, but that plan can change quickly. We may need to help another department, assist a resident with a question, or respond to something unexpected. That's what makes the work interesting.

Herb Carpenter

I think you're right. That's probably true for a lot of people. You start the day with a plan, and to some extent you follow it, but every day here presents opportunities to change direction.

Something may happen with a resident or in the community, and suddenly you're doing something completely different. I often find myself driving residents to appointments or activities when I didn't expect to.

That's one of the things I enjoy most. You can make a difference every day, and you have the ability to create meaningful change.

Ben Dion

I think that's one thing people don't always understand about Fellowship Housing Opportunities. We're not just a landlord.

We're engaged with our residents. They stop in to pay rent, ask questions, share concerns, or simply check in. Herb, people genuinely enjoy stopping by

to talk with you. They like catching up, hearing about upcoming resident events, or finding out what's next. Maybe miniature golf again—that would be nice.

That's a unique part of our organization.

Herb Carpenter

Yes. Before you realize it, you become involved in people's lives. They know you, and you know what's happening in theirs.

For those who don't stop by, we stay in touch over the phone. I try to keep notes about what's happening in residents' lives so I can ask about those things later or check in if they've been through a difficult time.

We've often described ourselves as an "interested landlord," but it's really about building meaningful relationships. That's incredibly important.

Ben Dion

Definitely.

You also have a unique perspective because you live in Concord. I don't—although I hope to someday. I think it's a wonderful place to raise a family.

When you're not in the office, what's your favorite thing to do in Concord?

Herb Carpenter

I'm really a foodie.

I enjoy trying new restaurants, going out for lunch or dinner, and seeing what Concord has to offer. I also enjoy walking around downtown during lunch and seeing what's happening on Main Street.

Every now and then I'll run into one of our residents, and it's always nice to catch up.

Ben Dion

It's also great to see more of our residents working locally now. We really appreciate the small businesses that employ and support them.

Concord has a lot to offer. What do you think are some of its strengths, and where do you think there's room to grow?

Herb Carpenter

Concord may be a small city, but it has a big heart.

You get to know people—whether they're local business owners, neighbors, or people you've known your whole life. There are excellent employment opportunities, a strong school system, and it's a wonderful place to raise a family.

The downtown has continued to improve over the years, and we're fortunate to have access to state government, historical resources, and so many community assets.

It's also centrally located. We're close to Boston, the Seacoast, and the White Mountains. It's been a wonderful place to live.

Ben Dion

It really is a great central location in New Hampshire.

Herb, thank you for joining us on our very first podcast. This is new for us. Surprisingly, not many nonprofits have podcasts like this.

I do want to give a shout-out to the New Hampshire Fiscal Policy Institute. They have a great podcast, and they do an excellent job sharing data and research. Ours is a little different because we're a different kind of organization.

How are you feeling about this so far?

Herb Carpenter

First, I'd like to thank you for putting this together.

One of the biggest challenges we've faced has been name recognition. People see our sign on the corner of State and Pleasant Streets, but many haven't really known what we do.

Over the past couple of years, you've done a tremendous job increasing awareness of Fellowship Housing Opportunities—sharing who we are, what we do, and strengthening partnerships with Riverbend Community Mental Health, NAMI New Hampshire, Intown Concord, and many other community organizations.

That visibility has been extremely important as we continue to grow and seek financial support, community partnerships, and volunteers.

You've been instrumental in making that happen, and we're fortunate to have you on our team.

When I first arrived, I thought there was a lot I needed to fix. Instead, I discovered an outstanding organization with dedicated staff. My role has really been to build on that foundation and continue improving the experience for everyone.

Ben Dion

Thank you. I appreciate your kind words, and I appreciate the work you've done to help guide this organization.

I've always appreciated the confidence you've had in me to pursue projects like this podcast. I think it's a great opportunity to highlight who we are, showcase our community partners, recognize the businesses that support us, and celebrate the Concord community.

You'll hear from many of those partners in upcoming episodes. I won't reveal who's joining us next—you'll have to tune in next month.

Be sure to follow the **State of Opportunity Podcast** on Spotify. You can also follow Fellowship Housing Opportunities on Facebook, Instagram, and LinkedIn for updates on new episodes and everything happening within our organization and throughout the Concord community.

Subscribe to our newsletter by visiting **fellowshiphousing.org** to stay informed about what's happening at FHO and around Concord. Each month, Herb also shares an update from the Executive Director's Desk about what's happening at the organization and what's coming next.

Thanks for listening, and remember to always stay positive, because you live in the **State of Opportunity**.