

Silently to the Top: America's Biggest Veteran Charity

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On September 11, 2001, firefighter Stephen Siller had just finished his shift and was headed to play golf with his brothers when a plane struck the North Tower of the World Trade Center.

Upon hearing the news, he asked his wife Sally to tell his brothers he would catch up with them later. He jumped into the Brooklyn Battery Tunnel, strapped on his fire gear, and ran into the Twin Towers. He never came back.

To honor Stephen Siller's death, his brother Frank created the Tunnel to Towers Foundation.

Born from the ashes of 9-11, the Stephen Siller Tunnel to Towers Foundation has become one of America's largest veteran nonprofit; and at breakneck speed. From a modest endowment of \$32m in 2018, it has gone to over half a billion dollars just three years later. A 14-fold increase.

And it has been lauded by high-profile Republican powerhouses. 19 years after the Foundation's creation, Frank Siller proudly accepted the 2020 Special Presidential Recognition Award from Donald Trump as former New York City mayor Rudy Giuliani looked on.

Giuliani has partaken in many of the numerous events put up by the organization over the years and lended his name and persona to promote its mission. Golf tournaments, 9/11-themed autographed T-shirts, charity marathons: These are only some of the initiatives that he joined to promote the organization that has been giving support to veterans and their families for over two decades.

Giuliani's own son, Andrew Giuliani, hosts a radio talk show dedicated to the Tunnel to Towers Foundation on the conservative New York City station 77 WABC.

And Fox News often plays the nonprofit's ads and features chairman Frank Siller in talk shows. The TV network has also donated \$2m to the Foundation in 2023.

Tunnel to Towers' main mission is to deliver adapted homes for critically wounded veterans and first responders, as well as for the families of those fallen in the line of duty. According to Tunnel to Towers' own website, the nonprofit counts with more than 1000 mortgage-free homes delivered or in progress. From climbs to 5k runs, from galas to 9/11-themed awareness programs, the charity has more than 80 annual events across the country under its belt.

Despite the many successes of Tunnels to Towers, there are reasons for concern.

Tunnel to Towers lavish gala events dedicated to the media organizations that support them have had exorbitant costs leaving losses of more than a half million dollars.

Foundation's decisions are taken by a board of directors that is mainly composed of members of the Siller family. This and the non-disclosure agreements that the charity makes all employees and some of its beneficiaries sign, make it hard to grasp the inner workings of the organization, leaving little room for checks and balances. In 2021, two family members of the Siller family personally benefited from real estate transactions with Tunnel to Towers. Additionally, expenses for office equipment and gala events have skyrocketed over the years, often leading to big losses of donated money.

And their smart homes flagship program has downsides too. From houses that are too big to afford for wounded veterans who are unemployed to structural issues and contracts that require them to use the home for a certain amount of time and fulfill media requirements, a lot of pressure is put on those that Tunnel to Towers claims to help.

Moreover, the Foundation claims that millions of dollars are being allocated towards fifteen Veterans Villages spread across the country, from Phoenix to Las Vegas, from Atlanta to Memphis. But only one facility in Houston is operational and the Foundation hasn't announced how other villages will become a reality.

Tunnel to Towers' assistance to fellow non-profits like US Vets failed to yield tangible outcomes as well. Veterans living at US Vet facilities have reported problems that include inadequate management, unsafe living conditions, deteriorating facilities, and poor hygiene. This raises questions about the allocation of funds and whether similar practices will be implemented in Tunnel to Towers' housing projects. The Foundation has stated that US Vets would serve as a blueprint for their own Veterans Villages.

Check and balances

Some experts casted doubt over why a charity like Tunnel to Towers would subject their former employees and even beneficiaries to signing a non-disclosure agreement. Doug White who has spent decades advising nonprofit board structures said this was the first time he's seen this arrangement.

This fact, in combination with the family ties within the Tunnel to Towers board, provide an environment with a lack of checks and balances.

In two instances, Stephen Siller's nephew, Anthony Genovese-Scullin and Kristen P. Siller benefited from real estate transactions with Tunnel to Towers.

In February 2019, Tunnel to Towers received the former home of John Hudson Dilgen in exchange for a new smart home adapted to his condition. Dilgen is a Staten Island teenager with a rare skin condition that makes his skin blister and tear easily. Tunnel to Towers sold the property to a family member, Anthony Genovese-Scullin. He later sold the property at a mark up of more than \$200,000.

Similarly, in 2010, Frank Siller transferred a two-story family home to his children Justin and Kristen P. Siller. Kristen later in 2021 sold the property to the family of a fallen soldier, who sold it back to Tunnel to Towers for a quarter of a million dollars less than it had acquired it.

But it is not only the properties that Tunnel to Towers buys and sells, the office spaces also raise questions over the independence of the board of directors.

Frank Siller, the CEO is the owner of the office building the foundation operates in through a shell company. The price the Foundation pays for its office in Staten Island is 40% above what renters pay for similar offices on Staten Island. It is the board that Frank Siller chairs who decides how much he will get paid. Rather than setting a fixed price, the amount fluctuates greatly over the years. In 2019, Tunnel to Towers paid Frank Siller \$154K in rent. Just two years later – over \$224K.

Tunnel to Towers also counts with a much smaller office in Connecticut. Between the two, they had office expenses of more than \$7m in 2022, despite only paying a quarter of a million in 2019. For contrast Greenpeace USA had four times more employees and four times as many offices in 2020, yet their office expenses amount to \$2m.

Despite the large office expenses, Tunnel to Towers does not list the supplier of the office expenses in their financial statements.

The fundraising galas of Tunnel to Towers have also been less than effective.

In the 2021 and 2022 fundraiser galas set up in honor of the FOX and 77 WABC, Tunnel to Towers incurred a loss of more than a half million dollars: The rent of the facilities for a single night gala event escalated to almost half a million dollars that year, and almost \$600,000 in 2022.

The Foundation also held a fundraiser gala at Donald Trump's Mar-a-Lago earlier this year. An event that was criticized for being a "pseudo-political" rally of Trump supporters and that led five organizations to pull out from the event, according to the Palm Beach Post. Tunnel to Towers, which usually posts a press release a week, has yet to publish any information about the event.

The Smart Home Fine Print

Kyle Hockenberry was part of the 1st Infantry Division while serving in Afghanistan in 2011. On a fateful day, 19-year-old Hockenberry stepped on a pressure plate IED during foot patrol. The explosion blew him up and left him without his legs under the knees.

He had an opportunity to start again when he became one of the first few smart homes recipients. He received his home in June 2014. But it wasn't like he expected it to be.

Although he agreed on a plan, he ended up with a 6,600 feet home that he couldn't afford and didn't receive financial assistance from Tunnel to Towers. "I'm a disabled vet and I don't make that much money," he said. "At the end of the day, it was just too much for me to afford and maintain."

Hockenberry was left with light bills of up to \$500 a month because the house has three furnaces and air conditioners.

To get the house, Tunnel to Towers made him sign a contract that required him to stay in the house for at least five years before being able to sell it.

"After that is done you are stuck with a big home and high costs," he said. This type of contract also requires smart homes' recipients to participate in five media events. Hockenberry credits these kinds of events as the reason why Tunnels To Towers grew so much in recent years. But he never felt comfortable doing that.

"Sometimes I felt like it was kind of a dog and pony show," he said.

John Peck, a 2012 Virginia smart home recipient, felt similarly. He said veterans could feel used as they were constantly reminded by emails or Facebook messages, encouraging them to join events.

Some veterans don't even know what their house will look like. When an improvised explosive device detonated underneath Thomas McRae on January 16, 2012, he lost his legs and left arm, sustained brain injuries, and lost vision in his right eye.

Tunnel to Towers first paid his mortgage off and then received his smart home in Maple Hill, NC, in 2016. That's when the problems started.

"They are f*****g miserable," he said. "They always want to build at the lowest possible cost," he said. McRae claims Tunnel to Towers used cheap materials to build his house and didn't receive financial support afterwards. He said he had to pay \$30,000 out of pocket for renovations since he moved in.

Something similar happened to a fellow veteran who doesn't want to disclose his identity as he signed an NDA.

"If I knew then what I know now I would have asked for a smaller home," he said. "But those weren't options, I just was presented with 3 floor plans." He said that the contractors who

built the house caused it to have structural issues he saw when he received his home in 2016. From dated elevators, to poor HVAC systems that would build up dirt from wheelchairs, to his kitchen not being made for a person in a wheelchair. As a consequence, he can't use his space efficiently.

Vet Villages: Big Promises, Diminished Reality

Now more than two decades old, Tunnel to Towers allocates millions of dollars to 15 Veterans Villages. These are housing complexes specifically tailored to veterans' needs as they are equipped with special services such as mental health counseling and career coaching. Yet their facility in Houston is operational.

Some public figures have lined up to support these projects. Republican George Kruse, commissioner of Manatee County, FL., learned about Tunnel to Towers in 2022 and made it his mission to bring their Veteran Village to his county.

The Manatee County Board of County Commissioners voted to approve the donation of a \$6 million plot of land to Tunnel to Towers, but the land's acquisition was fraught with challenges and political maneuvering.

"I've given incentives to pay the fees for companies who build affordable housing," Kruse said. "We're starting to build a reputation as a favorable place for affordable housing developers."

That same year, the Tunnels to Towers Foundation deepened its partnership with US Vets, a sister non-profit which also strives to house vulnerable veterans. The Foundation gave US Vets \$80,454,968 – the largest contribution Tunnel to Towers has ever made to one organization. In exchange, US Vets will assume oversight for the wrap-around services at Florida's yet-to-be-built Tunnels to Towers Veterans Village. However, US Vets has drawn criticism for the services they provide and their lack of responsiveness to residents.

Greg McKnight Jr., a 32-year-old veteran, said that he lived at US Veterans in Inglewood, California, for 9 months in 2018. McKnight's stories of his time there are laden, with bed bugs, the frustrations of cohabiting with mentally unstable individuals, the stress of coping with widespread drug use among fellow veterans and the challenges of gang-related crimes inside and directly outside the US Vets building.

"I never felt safe going into US Vets," McKnight recalled.

McKnight said that living in a small room with two other men was difficult for him: He recalled being awakened in the dead of night by his roommate's screams and unsettling remarks about death and time in the army. He managed to gather sufficient funds to relocate to another

room within the US Vets facility, opting for a shared apartment with a separate bedroom costing \$500 a month, expecting an improvement in his living conditions. But even after paying \$500, he experienced mentally unstable roommates and a worsened bed bug situation.

McKnight acquired PTSD from the bed bugs. The small red bug bites covered his body for the entirety of his stay at US Vets—and . And sleeping was not even a respite from the pain.

“Staff brushed off my complaints,” he said. “They told me that everyone at US Vets experienced bed bugs.” Whenever he gets a pimple now, he remembers how miserable and helpless he felt there.

Kevin Kincey, the current Outreach Coordinator at US Vets Inglewood, said that they do have problems with other veterans stealing from each other, but he declined to comment on the bed bug infestation.

Andaye Hill-Espinoza worked as a Project Development Intern for six months in 2013 at the California Long Beach location, which was specifically for female veterans and their children. She said that she was disappointed with how US Vets cared for their residents. Hill-Espinoza explained that the majority of the women she met at US Vets had experienced sexual assault, and the organization did not have concrete steps to help them through their abuse.

Reality falls short of promises in other areas as well. The mission statement of US Vets reads: “Our mission is the successful transition of military veterans and their families through the provision of housing, counseling, career development, and comprehensive support.” Although US Vets purports to assist its clients with job searches and their overall mental health, McKnight insists the only beneficial aspects of its services were the free bus passes, the provision of three daily meals, and convenient access to the nearby park, where he enjoyed playing basketball.

The numbers do little to discourage McKnight’s narrative. US Vets’ Long Beach website said they have assisted 81 veterans in securing job placements while also mentioning aiding 37,292 individuals staying at their facilities. While some veterans may not need help finding a job or may be unable to hold one, US Vets’ numbers suggest a 0.2% success rate in job assistance.

More than two decades after Tunnels to Towers’ founding, there may be sufficient reason for donors, veterans organizations, and political backers to look closely at how the Foundation uses its funds to fulfill its mission.