Upper Valley MEND is working toward purchasing 31 apartment units in Leavenworth to preserve as affordable rentals for the local workforce. This acquisition is part of a larger push to grow MEND’s affordable housing portfolio with a goal of housing more Upper Valley workers locally.

The 31 housing units have been owned by the Marson family since they were built in the 1970s-90s. The family has kept the rents affordable over time. When the family decided to sell their rental portfolio, they offered the units to MEND first, hoping to preserve the low rents for tenants.

“My sister Tamara, my wife Margaret, myself and our families just felt it was the right thing to do to continue the legacy of our parents and grandparents,” owner Ken Marson said. “We want to hopefully set an example for others to help in this goal of affordable housing because it’s not an easy goal and it’s tough when you’ve got a place where everyone wants to come to."

Upper Valley MEND is currently doing due diligence and beginning to secure grant funding to purchase the properties. Funding will come from a combination of grants and donations. Chelan County has awarded the first funding, $310,000 in acquisition funds for the project. The public can expect to see more details about this project, including the launch of a capital campaign, in 2023.

“Our goal in buying these buildings is to preserve them as affordable rentals for the Upper Valley workforce. Local affordable housing means our community is strong and resilient, our local businesses can thrive, and local employees can have a high quality of life,” said Kaylin Bettinger, Upper Valley MEND executive director. “Upper Valley MEND is committed to carrying on the legacy of affordability the Marson family began.”

Because the Marson family has kept rent at affordable levels, Upper Valley MEND’s first goal is to keep rents affordable, so the households who are currently renting the units can continue renting.

“All of the units are currently rented, and our intention is to carry on the legacy of being good landlords, as the Marson family has done,” Bettinger said. “Our goal is to not displace anyone, and as these units turn over naturally, we plan to offer them to renters who are income-qualified and work locally.”

In 2022 and 2023, Upper Valley MEND will be building the framework for this workforce rental program, including who can qualify when rental units become available, and how businesses can be involved to help secure rentals for their employees.

This acquisition is part of a larger push by Upper Valley MEND to provide local housing for more Upper Valley employees. The 31 rentals will be added to MEND’s affordable housing portfolio, which already includes 20 homes that are owned by low- and moderate-income households.

The Upper Valley has become an incredibly expensive place to live, especially for people working locally. A combination of factors has led to the current housing crisis, including desirable location, limited buildable land, high construction costs, our proximity to the Seattle area where incomes are often higher, and a local economy based on lower wage and seasonal jobs. The lack of local affordable housing means local businesses struggle to hire and retain staff, who often must commute long distances to their jobs.

“Other resort communities around the country have made progress toward solving their workforce housing challenges. We’re looking to the playbooks these communities have created, as we build our
workforce housing program,” Bettinger said. “We have huge challenges, but there are also well-tested solutions. These 31 units are a start toward that goal.”