

Housing Stability / Homeless Assistance and the Military Community

Overview of the Issue

Homelessness in a developed nation is inexcusable, but homelessness among the military community is even more shameful. These citizens have sacrificed for their country, often risking their lives to protect American freedoms. Though many homeless veterans served during the Vietnam era, a growing number of homeless veterans are from the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan (Henroid, 2011). Circumstances that cause homelessness, such as a lack of affordable housing, opportunity for a livable income and access to health care, afflict many in the military community. In addition to those forces, many at-risk veterans, Reserve and National Guard members also suffer from the invisible wounds of war such as post traumatic stress disorder and traumatic brain injury. While it took almost a decade for the first large influx of veterans from Vietnam to become homeless, the prevalence of behavioral health issues in new veterans has reduced the time it takes these veterans to succumb to homelessness (Rourke, 2007). The government has recently made it a goal to eliminate veteran homelessness, and with this goal came funding. The Department of Veterans Affairs' (VA) budget was dramatically increased, with \$600 million in grants available for organizations with anti-veteran homelessness missions (Shinseki, 2010). Communities must act now to take advantage of this opportunity to further assist their homeless and near-homeless military community members in getting the help they need.

In the United States, 200,000 veterans will be homeless at one point during a year's time, with approximately 107,000 veterans being homeless each night. Nearly one-fifth of the homeless population is veterans, though only 8 percent of the general population can claim veteran status. Three out of four of homeless veterans have alcohol, drug or behavioral health problems. Only one in four have used any of the homeless services provided by the VA (National Coalition for Homeless Veterans, 2011). Though fewer in numbers, female veterans are four times more likely to become homeless than men. In addition to the factors leading to homelessness among male veterans, female veterans are more likely to have dependent children (Biberica & Fletcher, 2010). In addition, there are currently 1.5 million veterans on the verge of homelessness (National Coalition for Homeless Veterans, 2011).

Existing Services

There are many programs currently available through the federal government, nonprofit community and others, such as the National Coalition for Homeless Veterans, The American Legion's Homeless Veterans Task Force and the VA's Health Care for Homeless Veterans program.

The VA served more than 92,000 homeless veterans in 2009, but this still leaves more than an estimated 100,000 who must seek assistance from local government agencies, community and faith-based organizations. Also to consider are the 1.5 million veterans one step away from homelessness that need support (National Coalition for Homeless Veterans, 2011). While veterans are at the highest risk for homelessness, Reservists and National Guardsmen are also at risk. Those on active duty, however, have many systems in place to deter homelessness, such as their housing allowance.

In June, 2011, Department of Labor Secretary Hilda L. Solis announced 122 grants totaling more than \$28 million to provide approximately 17,000 veterans who are homeless or at risk of being homeless with job training to help them succeed in civilian careers. Through Homeless Veterans Reintegration Programs across the country, homeless veterans may receive occupational, classroom and on-the-job training, as well as job search and placement assistance, including follow-up services. Grantees under this program coordinate their efforts with various local, state and federal social service providers, including, but not limited to, the VA, the Substance Abuse Mental Health Services Administration and Housing First initiatives under the National Alliance to End Homelessness.

Housing is a Critical Component

Homeless shelters may have an adequate number of beds in existence, however, an ample supply of such beds and even transitional housing will not end veteran homelessness, especially among our most vulnerable and needy veterans. What is needed most are permanent, dignified, affordable housing options with associated support services to help veterans confront the conditions that contributed to their homelessness. The current services must be aware of what veterans need to overcome homelessness. There are numerous examples around the country of how such housing, especially when coupled with low barriers to admittance, have successfully kept even chronically homeless veterans successfully housed. It is also now well established that addiction, mental health and other services are far more effective when the individual is stably housed.

How You Can Help

Homeless and near-homeless veterans, Reservists, National Guardsmen and their families need a community that remembers and honors them. You can help by:

- Raising awareness among homeless shelters and health providers about veteran issues and resources
- Coordinating efforts of existing veteran services to ensure every homeless veteran has access to secure housing, nutritional meals, basic health care, substance abuse rehabilitation programs and mental health counseling
- Connect homeless veterans with the resources available to help them with employment, such as job assessment, training and placement.

These practices will benefit the community by taking the homeless off the streets, filling jobs with capable people who have a unique skill set and, ultimately, lightening the demand on the communities' social services. Homeless veterans will benefit from acquiring a stable housing situation, feeling useful and productive in a job, and having their mental and physical healthcare needs met.

Quotes

“We are in a tough fight. I know it, you know it. Resources alone won’t end veteran homelessness – people will. Determined, dedicated risk-takers who know the causes; who know what may work and what definitely won’t; and who know how to deliver a mission that’s complex, complicated, rife with bureaucracy and historically long on promises and short on delivery. People will deliver. People like you.”

- Secretary Eric K. Shinseki at the
National Forum on Homelessness Among Veterans, Dec. 7, 2010

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