

Doesn't the Department of Veterans Affairs take care of our homeless veterans?

To a certain degree, yes. According to the VA's 2003 CHALENG report, however, the number of homeless veterans far exceeds the level of services currently available. The VA estimates more than 275,000 veterans are homeless on any given night, and more than half a million will face homelessness during the year. There is still a great need for help from within the veterans' community.

VA statistics confirm that as many as 23% of all homeless have served our country in a military uniform. While less than 9% of the country's population are veterans, 32% of the homeless men are veterans ... three-fourths of those served during war or a period of armed conflict.

What services do homeless and at-risk veterans need?

Veterans need a coordinated effort that provides secure housing and nutritious meals; essential physical health care, substance abuse aftercare and mental health counseling; and personal development and empowerment.

Veterans also need job assessment, training and placement assistance. NCHV believes all programs to assist homeless veterans must focus on helping veterans reach their highest level of self-management.

The most effective programs for homeless and at-risk veterans are community-based, nonprofit, **vet helping vet groups**. Programs that seem to work best feature transitional housing with the camaraderie of living in structured, substance-free environments with fellow veterans who are succeeding at bettering themselves.

Because government money for homeless veterans reaches only about 18% of those in need, it is critical that community groups reach out to help provide the support, resources and opportunities most Americans take for granted: housing, employment and health care.

Approximately 200 community-based veteran organizations across the county have successfully reached homeless veterans. Veterans who participate in these programs have a higher chance of becoming productive, taxpaying citizens again.

What can your Veteran Service Organization do?

There are many ways Veteran Service Organizations can help to eliminate homelessness within the veteran community in your town.

■ Begin by **understanding why** there is such a high percentage of veterans among the homeless. In addition to the complex set of factors affecting all homeless...extreme shortage of affordable housing, poverty, disability...a large number of displaced and at-risk veterans live with lingering effects of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and substance abuse, compounded by a lack of family and social support networks.

■ To better understand the issue from the homeless veteran's perspective, contact homeless veteran service providers in your area and ask them to arrange for a **homeless, or formerly homeless, veteran to speak to your VSO**.

■ Next, **choose one issue** relating to homeless veterans that your VSO can concentrate on. Be certain you have a consensus on which issue to make a priority.

■ **Determine the need in your community**. Visit with homeless veteran service providers. **NCHV has a list** of programs across the nation that can be a starting point. Every VA Medical Center and Vet Center has a Homeless Coordinator. Contact them and ask about their needs.

■ **Publicize, through your VSO newsletter** or bulletin board, a list of local service providers who need volunteers for a few hours a week or month. On your list include soup kitchens, shelters, transitional and permanent housing programs, VA Medical Centers and Vet Centers.

■ **Suggest your VSO donate** a percentage of your budget, or proceeds from a special event to your local homeless veteran provider or to NCHV.

■ **Depending on the interests of your members, consider one of the following:**

- **Register homeless veterans to vote.** Get in touch with existing voter registration efforts and let them know you are interested in registering homeless veterans.
- **Participate in the nearest Stand Down for homeless veterans.** A Stand Down is a 2- to 3-day outreach event that gives homeless veterans and their families a secure place to receive nutritious meals, health care, clothing, legal assistance and a wide range of other information and supportive services. A Stand Down is *not a solution* to homelessness...it is an opportunity to create an atmosphere conducive to change and recovery. It takes hundreds of caring people and organizations to host a Stand Down. To learn about current Stand Downs, dates and locations, visit **www.nchv.org**. Additional information can be obtained by contacting:
 - The original organizers of Stand Downs, **Vietnam Veterans of San Diego, 619-497-0142**, for the *Stand Down Manual*.
 - VA Medical Center Homeless Coordinators.
- **Participate in local homeless coalitions.** Federal dollars for homeless programs are prioritized and disbursed through local homeless coalitions. Often veterans' needs are not considered during the priority setting process.

Where are veterans' priorities in your community? Are they receiving needed services? Contact your local Mayor's office or the HUD-VET Resource Center at 800-998-9999. Be a voice for homeless and at-risk veterans.

Contact your elected representatives...

Elected representatives want to hear from people in their districts about issues voters support. Effective ways of communicating with your legislators include visiting them in person and writing letters.

- *See the NCHV website* for current legislative issues concerning homeless veterans: www.nchv.org
- *Invite elected officials and political candidates to speak before your VSO.* Invite other VSOs to participate in the forum. Ask them what they are doing to end homelessness among veterans.
- *The importance of a well-written, personalized letter should never be underestimated.*

Effective letter writing tips...

You can find your **elected officials' telephone numbers and addresses in the blue pages** of your local telephone book.

- *Let your legislator know that you are a constituent.* Legislators respond best to letters from voters in their districts. Include your address.
- *Get to the point.* The best letters are short, well organized and to the point. Include personal or local facts.
- *Tell elected officials what you want them to do.* Don't be shy; elected officials are in the business of serving you. **Request a response.**
- *Write to other key legislative members* on the House and Senate Veterans Affairs Committees.

Multiplying your efforts by using the news media...

When you have your project selected, **use the news media** to reach as many people as possible. Send your message to your local newspaper as a Letter to the Editor, telephone a radio call-in show, or make public announcements at local civic gatherings.

Additional Resources ...

- **National Coalition for Homeless Veterans**
800-VET-HELP or visit www.nchv.org
- **Veteran Organizations Homeless Council**
Contact through your VSO's national headquarters.
- **National Alliance to End Homelessness**
202-638-1526 or visit www.naeh.org
- **National Coalition for the Homeless**
202-737-6444 or visit www.nationalhomeless.org
- **National Law Center on Homelessness & Poverty**
202-638-2535 or visit www.nlchp.org
- **Department of Veterans Affairs**
Veterans Benefits 800-827-1000
Homeless Veterans Initiatives 202-273-5774
National Center for Women Veterans
202-273-6193
National Center for PTSD 800-296-6300
Persian Gulf Veteran Hotline 800-749-8387 or visit www.va.gov/
- **Department of Housing and Urban Development**
Veteran Resource Center 800-998-9999 or visit www.hud.gov/hudvet/vetmain.html
- **Department of Labor**
Veterans Employment and Training Service
202-693-4700 or visit www.dol.gov/vets/
- **Small Business Administration.**
Veterans Affairs 202-205-6773 or visit www.sba.gov/wv/vets.html

How VSOs Can Help Homeless Veterans



NATIONAL COALITION *for* HOMELESS VETERANS

333½ Pennsylvania Ave., SE
Washington, DC 20003-1148
202-546-1969 FAX 202-546-2063
1-800-VET-HELP
FAX 1-888-233-8582
E-mail: nchv@nchv.org
Website: <http://www.nchv.org>