

Shelter and Housing
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In almost every community in America there is an inadequate supply of safe, affordable housing for persons with low incomes. The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and community-based service providers offer emergency assistance and transitional housing programs for homeless veterans, but in most cases these reach only about 60 percent of the veterans who need assistance and, in most cases, provide assistance for a limited time. Because of limited resources, these programs often have enrollment criteria that embrace veterans with mental health issues, substance abuse histories, or co-occurring disorders at the exclusion of veterans whose homelessness is caused by economic or other short-term crises.

This assistance network is now only beginning to receive requests for help from veterans of Operation Iraqi Freedom and Enduring Freedom (OIF/OEF). Research shows there is likely to be a significant increase in demand for homeless assistance from these new combat veterans, the largest deployment of troops since the Vietnam War. The current level of homeless services is also being strained by the advancing age of Vietnam-era veterans, and a new veteran subpopulation – women veterans, both with and without dependent children. For the first time in American history, women comprise nearly 14 percent of the nation's combat forces in Iraq, and women currently represent the fastest growing segment of the homeless veteran population.

Housing is usually addressed on three levels: temporary shelter, transitional living facilities with supportive services, and a permanent housing with or without supportive services.

Veterans who lose their housing – regardless of the reasons – will most likely have to progress through all three levels before they become self sufficient and able to live independently. Depending on how long a veteran has lived on the street, that progression can take many years to complete. Veterans with serious mental health illness or other disabilities may never be able to achieve full independence. Veterans with histories of alcohol and drug abuse, legal problems or incarceration face extreme obstacles when trying to obtain and maintain housing.

Because of limited public assistance resources, homeless programs are usually subject to a priority system that favors single parents with dependent children, the elderly and the disabled over veterans without an obvious substance abuse, mental illness or other disability. The reality is that, in virtually every community in America, there is a critical shortage of safe decent affordable housing for persons and families with low and extremely low incomes. More than 1.5 million veterans live below the federal poverty level.

Most communities have shelters that provide emergency assistance to victims of catastrophic events, domestic violence and homelessness on a daily basis. Most of these are restricted to women or men, the main exception are shelters that accept women and children. There are very few shelters that are able to receive men with dependent children. The availability of social workers and referrals to supportive services varies

widely; and people who are known to be homeless are usually asked to leave the premises each morning and are not allowed to check back in until late afternoon.

That practice makes it difficult to connect homeless veterans with service providers who can help them, even from VA sources, particularly if the veteran is dealing with serious emotional or mental disorders. For veterans with alcohol or substance abuse issues, this may be their only recourse until they complete a sobriety or drug rehabilitation program. In those cases, they most likely will need a case manager from a veteran service provider or veteran service organization (VSO) to work with them to ensure completion of the program in order to become eligible for enrollment in a transitional housing facility.

Veterans without substance abuse problems who must reside in an emergency shelter while waiting for placement in a transitional program may need similar support because of the emotional stress and lower esteem often encountered by people who find themselves in this situation.

Helping homeless veterans work their way back into permanent housing and economic self sufficiency is the goal of our homeless program. We are going to utilizing a “housing first” approach to this end. This model moves homeless people and families into housing units relatively quickly and then makes supportive services available to them. This could best be described as “permanent supportive housing” rental units that will be offered to veterans who need services such as case management, income supports, outpatient mental health care and long term physical and occupational therapy.

These problems take on added urgency when you consider the fact that the majority of troops who have seen action in Iraq and Afghanistan haven’t even begun seeking assistance.