

HUMBOLDT COUNTY HOMELESS VETERANS

SUMMARY

The Grand Jury investigated the problem of homeless veterans in Humboldt County. This is an issue which we found complex and daunting to investigate. While the Grand Jury must limit investigations to agencies and issues that are local to Humboldt County, it was necessary to this investigation to at least review the scope and availability of State and Federal services in order to determine if there are unmet areas of need that the addition of local programs or resources may help to fill.

We found that many homeless, including veterans, are afflicted by serious mental illness and alcohol and/or drug abuse that result in serious problems for themselves and the community. There are numerous services available to veterans from which many may benefit. However, we also found some seemingly insurmountable barriers and restrictions in place, which could make it impossible for some veterans to participate in some or all of the programs from which they might benefit.

There are many organizations and county departments that provide a wide variety of services for veterans. While the Federal government often is the source of funding for many services, the County is often required to be the entity that seeks or approves application for funding resources to support locally administered programs.

We learned that homeless veterans, who can accept opportunities to take job training, live in transitional housing, observe curfews and other rules, will most likely be successful in reintegrating into mainstream society. Our investigation does not focus on these veterans; instead it addresses those who are unable or choose not to do so, and how the County may help them.

While it is impossible to do a thorough review of veterans services without noting State and Federal resources, we included such review only to clearly identify gaps in services, or gaps in access to services that local efforts or programs may help to fill. Some specific recommendations for local action were identified which could help to increase access to available services by veterans who currently fall within those gaps.

BACKGROUND

A vast majority of the problems encountered by homeless veterans are indistinguishable from those of the greater homeless population. Therefore, it is impossible to address the issue of homeless veterans without speaking to the concerns of the homeless in general.

The problems associated with the homeless and specifically homeless veterans, are not just a local problem. On any given night, nearly 63,000 veterans are homeless in the U.S. This is the figure estimated in Ann Jones' book; *They Were Soldiers: How the Wounded Return from America's Wars—The Untold Story* (2013). A similar survey by US Vets, a national veteran's

organization, confirms this figure and states veterans make up one fifth of the total homeless population.

Precise estimates of homeless people are difficult to obtain. Various surveys indicate up to 2,000 individuals are homeless in Humboldt County, of which 20-35% are veterans.

We discovered that many veterans are reluctant to admit to service providers and others that they are homeless and often that they are veterans. Many “just disappear” when approached by an outsider, according to witnesses interviewed by the Grand Jury.

Veteran’s organizations, mental health professionals, county officials, and veterans themselves all confirmed that there are a few shelters for women and children in Humboldt County but hardly any for single, adult men. Few have places to sleep, protection from the cold and rain, or a place to take showers or defecate. A report by the New Directions Program indicates most homeless individuals in encampments are longtime residents of Humboldt County.

The housing shortage for homeless is acute and rentals cost more than most homeless veterans can afford. Many veterans have animals as companions, and we learned that the veterans typically take good care of their animals, however; owning a dog eliminates many housing options for the homeless veteran. We were told by witnesses that permanent housing is extremely important for the mentally ill in order to be capable of benefiting from services that are available to them.

According to the 2014 Draft Housing Element of the Humboldt County General Plan Housing Element Update:

“The housing needs of the very low income and the shelter needs of the homeless are not being adequately met and the supply of land available for multi-family housing is constrained by infrastructure limitations and zoning.”

The plan also “seeks to provide housing and shelter opportunities for the homeless and extremely low income populations.”

APPROACH

The committee based this report on interviews with numerous individuals and organizations associated with veterans, veterans services, and the homeless. Our review of available services identified the following resources (Humboldt County local and governmental organizations are noted with an *):

***North Coast Veterans Resource Center (a nonprofit agency):** This Center assists eligible veterans with enrolling in and referring to available services. It offers transitional housing, opportunities to live or stay in permanent housing, residential and outpatient substance abuse treatment and counseling for mental illness. They also offer supportive services to the veterans’ families who are homeless or at risk. Assistance in finding employment is also an integral component. Since veterans must be sober for two weeks before they can be accepted

into the North Coast Veterans Resource Center program, the first task is often gaining admission to one of the available detoxification programs.

***Humboldt County Veterans Services:** Services offered include benefit counseling, claim preparation and assistance. They assist veterans, their dependents and survivors in obtaining benefits from federal, state and local agencies administering programs for veterans.

***The Mental Health Branch of the Humboldt County Department of Health and Human Services:** This County Agency provides outpatient services, inpatient services and alcohol and drug services. There are two vans that go to homeless camps on a monthly schedule. There is also a 30 foot long Mobile Engagement Center that provides many services to the homeless.

***The Humboldt County Housing and Homeless Coalition:** The coalition is made up of local businesses, housing advocates, elected officials and others interested in addressing homelessness in the county. The Coalition has received financial support from the Housing and Urban Development (HUD) during the last ten years to finance housing. Their accomplishments include acquiring Federal housing assistance vouchers for homeless veterans, opening extreme weather shelters in Eureka and McKinleyville and increasing access to permanent housing for the longtime homeless.

Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD): This Federal agency has a Continuum of Care program that allows a local committee of city and county officials and other interested persons to apply as a group for funding for projects such as the Homeless Management Information System, point in Time Count, Arcata House Partnership (3 houses), emergency shelters, and permanent supportive housing. These grants are for various amounts, and over recent years have resulted in \$4,000,000 being awarded locally.

Veterans Administration: This Federal agency provides medical and financial benefits, home loans, and many other services to eligible veterans.

California Department of Veterans Affairs: This State agency services include Cal Vet Home Loans, California General Veteran's Services, Northern California Veterans Cemetery, Pensions and Widow's Benefits, and California Veterans Homes.

***The Eureka Rescue Mission:** The Mission offers hot meals and temporary shelter and in-house programs.

The Eureka Veterans Center: Eureka Veterans Center is a VA program that offers counseling for veterans suffering from PTSD and sexual abuse.

G.I. Rights Hot Line: The Hot Line crisis takes calls from veterans from all over the United States. The number for this Hot Line is 1 (877) 447-4487.

Stand Down Program: This community event is designed to reach out and give assistance to veterans and help them connect with services and benefits.

National Alliance on Mental Health (NAMI): NAMI provides education and training as well as support for families of those with severe mental illness.

New Directions: This program reaches out to homeless people with an opportunity to work, learn new skills and become independent of other programs. Unlike many other programs, it does not have any sobriety related restrictions on who can participate.

Veterans Administration Clinic: Although it is difficult to get doctors to come to Humboldt County, this new medical clinic provides many services to local veterans. Some procedures or general healthcare can be provided by a telenursing program which provides care without the burden of traveling to the nearest vet clinic.

Betty Chinn and Community and Church Volunteers: These dedicated groups of volunteers provide food and clothing to the homeless by taking food to those who are living in out of the way places.

Betty Kwan Chinn Daycare Center: In a single location this Center provides numerous services including housing search assistance, the Open Door Mobile Medical Van, assistance in enrollment for benefits and public assistance, referrals to community resources, and job search assistance. It also provides clients assistance in obtaining their General Education Diploma (GED), addiction and drug counseling, parenting classes, as well as other classes and a homeless court.

St. Vincent de Paul: This organization provides hot meals, clothing and other assistance. There are showers which are accessible to the disabled at their dining center.

College of the Redwoods Veterans Resource Center: The community college provides assistance to veterans who are students at the college.

Humboldt State University Veterans Resource Center: The University provides assistance to student veterans.

DISCUSSION

According to State law each county must provide a safety net for the poorest of the poor. Government services for veterans are provided with funding from federal, state, and county resources. There are numerous community and private organizations that provide services as well.

We learned that the camps where veterans stay are dangerous because fights and theft are daily occurrences. The police come every few months to clean out the camps for health and hygienic reasons. The homeless are then forced to move out, only to come back at a later time.

A member of the Human Rights Commission presented a letter to the Board of Supervisors during their February 9, 2014 meeting, declaring that, based on Government Code sections 8698-8698.2 and Senate Bill 2, there is a shelter crisis in Humboldt County. The letter also urged the

Board to authorize the building of sanctuary camps and micro villages exclusively for homeless veterans.

Homeless veterans who suffer from mental illness often have difficulty obtaining services and other benefits. According to US Vets, the most common illness returning veterans suffer from is Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Symptoms of this potentially crippling disease according to the website for military veterans, (<https://maketheconnection.net/conditions>) are:

- Feeling upset by things that remind you of what happened,
- Having nightmares, vivid memories or flashbacks of the event that made you feel that it is happening all over again,
- Feeling emotionally cut off from others,
- Feeling numb or losing interest in things you used to care about,
- Becoming depressed, thinking that you are always in danger, feeling anxiety, jittery, or irritated,
- Experiencing a sense of panic that something bad is about to happen,
- Having difficulty sleeping,
- Having trouble keeping your mind on one thing,
- Having a hard time relating to and getting along with your spouse, family or friends.

Many veterans with PTSD have not been diagnosed with the illness when they leave the service. Often symptoms may occur years later. Treatment of these symptoms is accomplished by a combination of medication and counseling. The Eureka Veterans Center offers counseling for veterans suffering from PTSD and sexual abuse and has about 300 clients at present.

A common barrier for homeless veterans wishing to access benefits is, not being able to come into an office and fill out the appropriate paperwork to get those services started. For some homeless veterans just getting to and entering a public building can be a challenge. For the seriously mentally ill, obtaining and completing a form can be overwhelming. Yet filling out these forms must be done if the veterans are to get assistance.

We learned that many veterans are denied benefits because they do not qualify or are not eligible. A fair number of veterans' organizations require personal and background information before services can be offered. Physical and mental illness, substance abuse, the lack of transportation, or other personal problems keep many homeless veterans from being admitted to or getting to many programs without someone to help them.

Veterans have confirmed that alcohol and drug abuse are serious problems among the homeless population. Heroin and methamphetamine abuse are widespread and many die of overdoses. Witnesses told us that marijuana, alcohol, heroin and methamphetamine are substances often used by veterans to numb their feelings of panic and anxiety caused by post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Detoxification facilities are limited locally and participation in Veterans Administration detoxification programs requires leaving the area.

Many homeless veterans, like other troubled persons, experience divorce, domestic violence, rejection by their families, unemployment and impoverishment.

The homeless, including veterans, can be prevented by police from sleeping in their cars at night in certain areas. They can also be forced to move from place to place during the daylight hours. We learned in our interviews that many veterans who are in jail are released during the night without any money or other resources, only to remain on the streets.

POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

According to the County Housing Authority, \$200,000 dollars from *U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD)* was spent in Humboldt County last year. These were continuum of care funds to provide low cost housing to the homeless, including homeless veterans.

During our investigation, we learned of successful programs in other areas, such as: Opportunity Village in Eugene, Oregon, Dignity Village in Portland, Oregon and Camp Quixote in Olympia, Washington. These are “micro villages” that offer the homeless a safe place to live and reduces the number of homeless living on the street. The villages consist of very small housing units. These programs appear to be successful. Another alternative to help the homeless is to have certain areas designated as sanctuaries or safe havens where homeless veterans can set up tents and sleep without being disturbed.

The Department of Housing and Urban Development’s (HUD) current housing policy is to provide small permanent housing units rather than temporary transitional housing such as motels, homeless shelters and tent camps. The Coalition for Housing and Homelessness has received 4.6 million dollars in federal funds over a 10-year period. About 46% of that funding has gone toward permanent housing for the chronically homeless while around 43% went to transitional housing. Locally nearly \$500,000 was used for the Homeless Management Informational Systems which collects data on the County’s homeless population over an extended period of time.

FINDINGS

- F1. Affordable adequate housing is scarce, and homeless veterans often sleep outdoors, or on the streets.
- F2. Homeless veterans frequently encounter barriers preventing them from accessing services.
- F3. Services are not grouped in one location.
- F4. Participants in permanent housing programs tend to be more successful in being mainstreamed back into the community than those in temporary or transitional housing.
- F5. There are homeless veterans not receiving the benefits for which they are eligible.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- R1. The Humboldt County Board of Supervisors should designate in the Housing Element of the General Plan Update that certain areas be identified where sanctuaries and or campgrounds can be established. (F1).
- R2. The Board of Supervisors should encourage Department of Health and Human Services to obtain funding, jointly with other community agencies, through HUD and other sources to build "micro housing villages" and sanctuaries for homeless veterans.
- R3. The Board of Supervisors should encourage the Humboldt County Health and Human Services Department to expand alcohol and substance abuse treatment to include more local detoxification services.
- R4. The Board of Supervisors should explore ways to reduce barriers to accessing services.

REQUEST FOR RESPONSES

Pursuant to Penal Code section 933.05, the following responses are requested;

- The Humboldt County Board of Supervisors respond to Recommendations 1, 2, 3, 4.

The Grand Jury invites the following organization to respond;

- The Humboldt County Planning Department respond to Recommendation 1.
- Humboldt County Health and Human Services Department respond to Recommendations 2 & 3.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

<http://www.usvets.com/> (accessed May, 2014).

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Jones, Ann, *They Were Soldiers: How the Wounded Returned From America's Wars—The Untold Story*. Haymarket Press, November 2013.

Reports issued by the Grand Jury do not identify individuals interviewed. Penal Code § 929 requires that reports of the Grand Jury not contain the name of any person or facts leading to the identity of any person who provides information to the Grand Jury.