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Want to Honor Vets this Memorial Day? Help End Veterans' Homelessness

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Abstract

Memorial Day is a day for remembering the men and women who died while serving in the United States Armed Forces.

As we gather around the grill with loved ones, let's also remember veterans who survived their term of service only to find themselves without a place of their own to celebrate holidays.

When I first began grappling with homelessness in my local community years ago, Dave, then the director of the local homeless shelter in our small town, told me a story which illustrates some of the special circumstances faced by homeless veterans in America. *[excerpt]*

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Want to honor vets this Memorial Day? Help end veterans' homelessness: Christopher Fee



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By Christopher Fee

Memorial Day is a day for remembering the men and women who died while serving in the United States Armed Forces.



As we gather around the grill with loved ones, let's also remember veterans who survived their term of service only to find themselves without a place of their own to celebrate holidays.

When I first began grappling with homelessness in my local community years ago, Dave, then the director of the local homeless shelter in our small town, told me a story which illustrates some of the special circumstances faced by homeless veterans in America.

A community of homeless vets had based themselves in caves outside of town, and after one was stricken with pneumonia and had to be hospitalized, his ongoing recovery left healthcare providers with a thorny dilemma: clearly, the man was ready to be released from the hospital, but they were loathe to send a recovering pneumonia patient to his home in the caves.

They released the patient into the care of the homeless shelter, and in short order the man's buddies came down from the hills and reclaimed their comrade, who went back up to the caves to rejoin his community.

This story speaks to fundamental truths about homeless veterans in America: men and women who may have thrived within the military community sometimes find themselves at loose ends back home, where no one seems to know or care about their special needs.

Veterans suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and other maladies, and may self-medicate with drugs and alcohol.

Substance abuse and mental illness tear away the community of family and friends we rely upon to help us through the tough times. Many of us know how gut-wrenching it can be when a friend or relative goes through such turmoil, often ending up on the streets.

The National Coalition for the Homeless estimates that 144,000 vets may be homeless, which is a useful barometer but most likely on the low side.

Many homeless people are in and out of shelters, bunking with friends, sleeping in cars, or camping out in parks and vacant lots. This is hardly just an urban phenomenon either.

I personally know quite a few folks who camp out more-or-less permanently in the woods in my rural Pennsylvania county.

Many people without housing attempt to avoid the stigma of being labeled "homeless," and this can prove especially true of older veterans, many of whom have become wary of engaging the government services available to them.

Like other struggling Americans, veterans have been stung by the recent economic downturn and its accompanying lack of affordable housing, especially in urban centers.

Without support networks and suffering from the lingering effects of PTSD and substance abuse, veterans have a tough time finding gainful employment. And their military occupational skills often are not readily transferable to civilian employment.

The Veterans Administration has taken the lead, providing healthcare to nearly 150,000 homeless veterans annually. Some 40,000 homeless veterans receive monthly benefits.

But the VA recognizes that federal agencies on their own cannot eradicate these problems, and for decades has emphasized partnerships with local agencies. Community initiatives have garnered real successes, reportedly reducing the number of homeless veterans by 70 percent over the last decade.

In November of 2009, the Department of Veterans Affairs set a goal of ending homelessness among veterans by 2015.

Numbers have declined significantly--studies indicate that as many as 24 percent of homeless veterans were housed between 2009 and 2013. Laudable as these results are, they are not enough.

We need to support veterans who may not be currently homeless, but who are at risk for becoming so. The National Coalition for Homeless Veterans estimates vets in this situation at 1.4 million.

The Coalition offers us steps we can take as individuals. Investigate the local need and the agencies addressing that need. Get involved and involve others. Join your local homeless coalition.

Give as generously as possible to worthy providers. And urge your elected representatives to help.

I believe providing safe homes and appropriate services to all U.S. veterans is an achievable goal. T

he government can't do it alone, and we know that the most effective programs are community-based and feature transitional housing with fellow veterans who are succeeding at bettering themselves.

Let's pledge to help veterans find stable employment at a livable wage, a key in the path to success. Let's remember that it is not enough simply to honor the dead.

We must fight for the living. This Memorial Day, Uncle Sam wants you to help end homelessness among American veterans.

Christopher Fee is the chairman of the English Department at Gettysburg College.

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