



11-11-2016

Commentary: Battles Won, but War on Vet Homelessness Continues

Christopher R. Fee
Gettysburg College

Joshua L. Stewart
National Coalition for Homeless Veterans

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Fee, Christopher, R. "Commentary: Battles Won, But War on Vet Homelessness Continues." Philly.com (November 11, 2016).

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Abstract

In his second inaugural address, Abraham Lincoln called upon Americans "to care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and his orphan ..." These words have proven so influential that the Department of Veterans Affairs has adopted them as its motto. But how well have we as a nation risen to this call? [*excerpt*]

Keywords

homelessness, veterans, obama administration, department of veterans affairs, veterans day

Disciplines

Military and Veterans Studies | Social Welfare

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Updated: November 11, 2016 — 3:01 AM EST

By Christopher R. Fee and Joshua L. Stewart

In his second inaugural address, Abraham Lincoln called upon Americans "to care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and his orphan ..."

These words have proven so influential that the Department of Veterans Affairs has adopted them as its motto. But how well have we as a nation risen to this call?

The good news is, over the last six years we have made unprecedented strides in this direction: Because of the concerted efforts of the Obama administration, homelessness among the veteran population has been diminished by 47 percent since 2010.

Over the same period, we have made even more impressive progress with that subset of homeless vets living outside or sheltering in places not meant for human habitation: This number has been cut by 56 percent. This is an astounding achievement that proves that we can indeed make inroads with even the most marginalized members of our society living in the very worst conditions, a population that for years has been considered the hardest to serve.

Moreover, 29 cities or counties, as well as the states of Virginia and Connecticut, have functionally ended veteran homelessness.

This is enormously heartening news.

It doesn't stop there: Our work with veterans has taught us the best ways to find, count, house, and keep vets in their housing, and these lessons are applicable to work with all populations of the homeless.

The Obama administration has committed itself to ending chronic homelessness, as well as homelessness among America's youth and families.

A change of administration should make no difference: Lincoln's words should be embraced by all Americans, and these commitments should be honored by any United States president, party, or Congress.

It is worth remembering, however, that even in those places that have succeeded in ending veteran homelessness the work goes on, in perpetuity: There will always be additional vulnerable vets who need our help to keep from falling through the gaps in our social-service safety nets.

First Lady Michelle Obama emphasized the ongoing nature of this commitment in an address to the U.S. Conference of Mayors: "None of us - even those who have met the goal - none of us are ever really finished with this challenge." Because the conditions that result in homelessness among veterans may never be eradicated, the first lady went on to underscore that: "Your work is not finished on the day you have a home for every veteran in your city."

Our elected officials must find common cause to address this unfinished work, and all Americans must raise their voices to ensure that homeless veterans are not forgotten.

What should elected officials do?

Congress should continue to provide robust funding for national programs, each ensuing administration should continue to incorporate lessons learned from the past six years into those programs, and all our elected representatives should take the responsibility to keep an eye on the future to ensure that an epidemic of veteran homelessness never happens again.

What should private citizens do?

Give time and money to organizations that provide services to homeless vets; donate as your conscience dictates to those groups that seem best to you, but support them. Even more crucially, hold your elected officials to this promise that we have made as a people to our veterans. Start today: Spend five minutes this and every Veterans Day contacting your representatives about these very issues.

Now, as Lincoln admonished his country at his second inauguration, it is time for us all "to strive on to finish the work we are in, to bind up the nation's wounds" and to continue to prioritize our obligation to serve those who have served their country.

Christopher R. Fee is professor and chair of English at Gettysburg College. cfee@gettysburg.edu

Joshua L. Stewart is director of policy at the National Coalition for Homeless Veterans. Jstewart@nchv.org