

Sacramento nonprofit looks to end homelessness among veterans

HIGHLIGHTS

Sacramento Steps Forward wants to house 668 homeless veterans by year's end

Technology helps 'navigators' connect homeless veterans with services

John Frank, 63, says he's 'human again' after getting housing, services



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Imagine if Sacramento were able to end homelessness among veterans of the U.S. armed services.

It won't happen in time for Veterans Day on Wednesday. But maybe by Veterans Day 2016?

By this time next year it could be a source of community pride if Sacramento can demonstrate that it has the will and the housing available for military veterans who need to get off the streets.

“I’m confident we will get there with our veteran homeless population,” said Ryan Loofbourrow, executive director of Sacramento Steps Forward, the lead agency combating homelessness in Sacramento County.

From January until October, Sacramento Steps Forward has been placing around 43 homeless veterans per month in supportive housing. The goal is to house 668 homeless vets by year’s end, Loofbourrow said.

Admittedly, that’s not a lot of people. But the symbolism of getting this population out of doorways, alleys, street corners and abandoned buildings is undeniable.

“Men and women who served our country shouldn’t be living outside, exposed to the elements,” Loofbourrow said.

Sacramento has been in a race against time to meet this goal set by the U.S Department of Housing and Urban Development. The federal agency provides most of Sacramento Steps Forward’s \$3 million operating budget.

It’s not uncommon for federal, state and local governments to couch new homeless initiatives in bold language. Almost a decade ago, the Sacramento City Council and Sacramento County Board of Supervisors approved the “Ten Year Plan to End Chronic Homelessness.”

Clearly, Sacramento hasn’t achieved that goal with illegal homeless camps eroding the American River Parkway, homeless populations swelling in suburban communities such as Carmichael, and homeless people congregating in Land Park and other unlikely locations.

The difference now is that mobile technology has hastened the process of connecting homeless people with services. Sacramento Steps Forward employs teams of “navigators” who fan out across the community. With iPads in hand, the navigators interview homeless people where they are and use that information to quickly match them with available resources.

That’s how John Frank, a 63-year-old Navy veteran, got off the streets and into a clean, quiet home in North Sacramento.

“I’m human again,” said Frank, from inside a house he shares with six other people. Frank isn’t quite sure how long he lived on the streets. Perhaps since 2012, perhaps earlier. He worked for years as a nurse in psychiatric hospitals after his four-year hitch in the Navy ended in 1980.

His life took a turn after suffering a stroke and a heart attack. “My wife says it happened in 2006 but I have no clue,” he said. He said the stroke left him unable to work in his chosen profession. “My memory was affected and I couldn’t dispense medication any longer.” With his income gone, Frank said, he and his wife burned through their savings quickly.

His wife was able to live with her daughter but Frank ended up on the streets. “I slept a lot at the Union Gospel Mission,” he said. A man used to earning his own way suddenly confronted the dehumanizing reality of homelessness.

“The way people look at you,” he said. “I had once been in their place and now people were looking right through me.

“You get lumped in with all the troublemakers even if you didn’t do anything wrong. It’s not nice.”

Frank said every day brought fresh blows to his sense of self. “I had never been a taker and suddenly having to wait for people to bring you food is horrendous,” he said.

“But hunger is a funny thing. When you are hungry, that thing you call pride goes out the window.” There were nights when Frank did sleep on the street, mostly on Marconi Avenue where he felt a little safer. But sometimes he found himself in downtown Sacramento, where he did not feel safe.

“You are mostly watching out for young guys with guns, drug dealers,” he said. “Every step you took held a challenge. You were going to face it. You didn’t know when but you knew it was coming.”

Frank said he was desperate in September when he met Kenneth Thomas, a navigator for Sacramento Steps Forward. It was at a veterans event at Mather Field. As he does with all of the homeless people he encounters, Thomas interviewed Frank.

Once Thomas found that Frank was a veteran, his objective was clear: If Thomas could determine that Frank had an honorable discharge, he could connect Frank with myriad services. It turned out that Frank did, Thomas said. He was eligible for health insurance through the Department of Veterans Affairs. He was disabled due to his stroke. He was a veteran.

Thomas got Frank into a home, but not without a struggle.

Thomas said many veterans don’t want to be in transitional housing, where there are more rules and controls on tenants. This may be a reaction to unpleasant memories of military service. Some vets may have experienced psychological trauma and feel unsettled or threatened in chaotic housing situations. They want to be in their own apartments or houses, Thomas said.

That’s what Frank wanted, but his troubled past since his stroke created its own challenges.

“He had four prior evictions,” Thomas said. That meant some landlords wouldn’t rent to him. But Thomas got Frank into a home administered by Sacramento Self Help Housing, a local nonprofit. With six roommates, Frank would only have to pay 30 percent of his Social Security income for rent.

He would have to follow rules, like no drinking or smoking in his home. A social worker would check up on him once a week. But Frank said those were small prices to pay to escape his ordeal.

“They brought us here on Oct. 8 and it was a big surprise,” he said. “When they gave us the keys we were like, wait, we live here?”

Frank remembers his days in the Navy as a time when he and other servicemen had to wear civilian clothes away from their bases because the public was so anti-military in the years right after the Vietnam War. He tended to agree with such sentiments and never paid much attention to Veterans Day.

Until now.

“It means something to me this year,” he said. “I have inhalers now and medicine for my blood pressure. For all that has happened, I’m pretty lucky.”

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