

Donald A. Strauss Foundation Scholarship

“Fighting For Those Who Fought: Homeless Veteran Advocacy”

Background

As the wounds of a deep economic recession begin to heal, Americans have gained a new respect for the frightening speed with which homelessness and poverty can strike. Widespread exposure to indiscriminate layoffs and foreclosures has made us more empathetic and willing to help fellow Americans who have dealt with unfortunate circumstances. However, there is one component of our society that seems to have been forgotten, and continues to suffer from levels of unemployment and homelessness that far exceed the general population's: veterans of the armed forces.

Despite making up less than 8% of the American populationⁱ, veterans comprise between 15-25% of the homeless population on any given nightⁱⁱ. Along with the factors that drive civilians into homelessness, including substance abuse and poor education, many veterans must deal with mental health issues that are unique to service members. Compounding the stress of a return to civilian life, many veterans are discouraged to find out that their skills do not transfer to private industry: regardless of how many “Support Our Troops” stickers may be seen on the highway, any recently discharged infantryman will find a job market that is unforgiving of years spent in Iraq or Afghanistan—preferring the uninterrupted résumé of a civilian instead.

But there is hope on the horizon for the men and women who have worn a uniform. President Barack Obama, along with VA Secretary Eric Shinseki and congressional leaders, has declared an initiative to end veteran homelessness by 2014ⁱⁱⁱ. The Department of Veterans Affairs has increased its capacity for career and mental health counseling, and has always offered free or low-cost healthcare for eligible veterans. Colleges, universities, and vocational schools have begun to employ counselors that

are familiar with veterans' improved educational benefits and entitlements. Yet these improvements are only meaningful if veterans know how to take advantage of them, and dissemination of information among homeless and at-risk populations is especially difficult. Homeless veterans cannot log on to the VA website to check their disability ratings, nor can they follow the American Legion's twitter account for timely updates on benefits. Veterans who do have access to the information are often intimidated by the amount of paperwork and complex reading that is concomitant to bureaucratic processes. Even if a veteran was fully capable of understanding the acronyms, policies, references, and rescissions of a Veterans Health Administration directive, he or she would have to read for hours a day just to remain current on entitlements.

Project Proposal

With the support of the Donald A. Strauss Foundation, I would like to form an outreach program that will connect the homeless veteran community with civic-minded students. The student-run organization will meet on a regular basis for training on entitlements, benefits, and opportunities afforded by the Department of Veterans Affairs, Veterans Health Administration, and other agencies. As students become familiar with directives and program eligibility, the organization will hold workshops at local shelters, food banks, and hospitals to help veterans find and apply for unused benefits.

Volunteers will be sought through instructor-approved classroom presentations, with a focus on students interested in political science and government affairs, and among the service-minded fraternities and sororities. The program will appeal to students who understand the benefit of hands-on education concerning federal, state, and local government policies, as well as those needing to round out a resume or application with "real world" experience. By giving students a chance to help others, while showing future employers and selection committees their social awareness and integrity, the program will prove beneficial to students as well as veterans. This mutually advantageous relationship is crucial.

because the program's sustainability will rely on satisfied students returning for multiple years and passing on their expertise.

The volunteer base will be a small, tightly knit core of focused students. A group of 5-10 highly motivated, well informed students will be small enough to ensure competency in each member, while still allowing individuals to seek expertise in different avenues.

Volunteer training will take place weekly in October and November, with sessions tapering down to an as-needed basis by early December 2011. Training sessions will be kept under one hour, and relevant literature will be provided for students to study at home. Naturally, the focal point of these sessions will be the policies and directives concerning veterans, but volunteers will also be educated on how to interact with indigent communities in a comfortable, respectful manner. When possible, guest speakers, such as VA representatives or legal advocacy specialists, will be invited for discussions.

Currently Underutilized Programs

These are just a few of the available programs for homeless, at-risk, and low-income vets:

Compensated Work Therapy- Offers vocational rehabilitation and job matching.

Homeless Veterans Dental Program- Provides procedures necessary to gain or re-gain employment.

Housing and Urban Development-Veterans Affairs Supported Housing- Provides Section 8 vouchers, counseling, and health services.

Each one of these programs has the potential to change a veteran's life, but includes complicated applications and eligibility requirements. From personal experience, I can attest to the fact that VA paperwork is daunting enough to separate a veteran from legally entitled benefits.

Timeline

May 2011-September 2011: Personal research on benefits, entitlements, and directives from VA and elected officials; contact shelters, food banks, and VA representatives from different locations to assess

need: schedule meetings and seminars for student training with VA reps and advocacy attorneys during Fall quarter.

October 2011: Targeted volunteer recruitment among poli-sci, pre-law students; seek UCD faculty adviser: prepare, print educational materials and required forms for volunteers: introductory volunteer training.

November 2011-December 2011: Begin visiting shelters, establish contact with potential clients; specialized training seminars with experts and consultants.

January 2012-March 2012: Continue shelter visits, follow up with previous clients; recruit future project leaders, explore future fundraising opportunities.

April 2012-May 2012: Continue shelter visits; contact clients, shelter administration to gauge success and suggest improvements; groom future volunteers; assess project's successes and shortcomings, lessons learned, etc.; prepare project report.

<u>Budget</u>	Volunteer materials (stationary, informational literature, printing, postage) \$200
	Volunteer transportation (rental van, fuel, meals, misc.= \$250/day X 20 days) \$3,500
	Training consultant's costs (transportation, meals, misc. =\$100/day 5 days) \$500
	Training incidentals (refreshments, handouts, etc. = \$25 X 40 sessions) \$1,000
	Personal costs as project organizer (telephone, printing, transportation, etc.) \$1,500
	Total: \$6,700.

Remaining funds will be dedicated to education expenses.

ⁱ Department of Veterans Affairs (www.va.gov/vetdata/Veteran_Population.asp)

ⁱⁱ National Coalition for Homeless Veterans (www.nchv.org)

ⁱⁱⁱ Interagency Council on Homelessness

(http://www.ich.gov/PDF/OpeningDoors_2010_FSPPPreventEndHomeless.pdf)