

## HOMELESS VETERANS REPORT

January 2009

During any given year, more than 308,000 veterans experience homelessness, according to the VA. Based on government reports, the majority served in the Vietnam War, with some surviving Korean and WWII veterans. The newest veteran service era already turning up in this group includes about 2,000 who served in Iraq or Afghanistan. Because of the extremely violent nature of combat seen in the current wars, the VA expects to see a significant surge in the homeless rate among these younger veterans, many of whom will be suffering from PTSD and traumatic brain injuries in greater numbers than veterans of previous wars.

These types of combat related injuries can lead to unstable behavior and substance abuse, all of which can make the reintegration into families and work all the harder. One 37 year old Army reservist returning from a year in Iraq to his home in Chester, PA, told *The New York Times* that he became involved in substance abuse trying to cope with the visions of horrors in his head, and subsequently cut himself off from his family and friends. "I went from being a pleasant guy, to wanting to rip your head off if you looked at me wrong." he told *Times* reporter Erik Eckholm.

Because the current form of warfare generally has no defined "Front Line" or mapped perimeters of what is commonly called a "Combat Zone", women who served in Iraq and Afghanistan are already reflecting a higher ratio of homeless veterans, estimated at more than 11% of all newly homeless veterans. Pete Dougherty, the VA's Director of Homeless Programs, has been quoted to say that sexual abuse is a {sic.- newer} risk factor for homelessness. Officials also stated that approximately 40% of the hundreds of homeless female veterans of recent wars have reported at least one incident of sexual assault by American soldiers while in the military.

The availability of meth and crack contribute to the rapid downhill spirals for all of the homeless veterans. Of the one million veterans who served in the military after the September 11 attacks, 72,000 are paying more than half their income for rent, leaving them highly vulnerable for becoming homeless. A new collaborative program of the Dept of Housing & Urban Development with the VA has resulted in 1,780 permanent or transitional housing units with supporting services. However, with a need for at least 26,800 such units needed, that represents less than 8%, so there is still much work to be done on this initiative.

Better late than never, the VA and other government agencies seem to be on the leading edge of addressing the Homeless Veterans situations. Included in their strategies are the more immediate recognition of the risk factors and symptoms, earlier intervention with counseling and medication, financial assistance and retraining in marketable skills. The fact that almost half of the homeless female veterans have reported incidences of sexual abuse indicates that efforts must be increased to address these matters in all branches of the military training from the beginning, regularly renewed and vigorously reinforced from the beginning to the end of service. Without these pro-active steps becoming SOP, all the soup kitchens, coats and blankets for the homeless and Operation Stand Down events will accomplish nothing more than a temporary "feel good" effort for those who just don't understand how we allowed this situation to reach this level.

Respectfully Submitted,  
Semper Fi,  
"Van" E. S. Van Gorder  
Chairman, Homeless Veterans