



Elks National Veterans
Service Commission Users Guide
Ending Veteran Homelessness

**HOW THE ELKS
CAN HELP**

One Last Stand

THE FIGHT AGAINST HOMELESSNESS

Every night, more than 47,000 veterans are living on the streets. Each with a different story, they all shared a common pledge: to support and defend this country. Their service is done. Now, it's the Elks' turn to serve.

In partnership with the Department of Veterans Affairs, the Elks National Veterans Service Commission has pledged to help end veteran homelessness, and ensure that every veteran has the safe, stable home they deserve.

It's estimated that 10 percent of homeless adults in America are veterans. The VA also estimates that 70 percent of veterans they serve have dealt with chronic homelessness and unemployment. But they've also made addressing the issue a priority. And they're counting on the nearly 800,000 Elks members to help.

"We're so excited about partnering with the Elks on this important issue facing the lives of so many Veterans," said Department of Veterans Affairs' Secretary Bob McDonald. "Partnerships like these will be critical to ensuring that all Veterans have access to safe and affordable housing."

Ready to join this fight? This booklet has everything you need to get started.



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Want to inspire others to get involved, too?

Show them this video!

ENF.ELKS.ORG/ONELASTSTAND

19.3
million

veterans in the United States

3.8 MILLION

veterans have a service-connected disability

AS MANY AS **10%**
OF HOMELESS ADULTS
ARE **VETERANS**

14%

of veterans served by
the VA have families

70 % of veterans served
by the VA have dealt with
CHRONIC HOMELESSNESS
and **UNEMPLOYMENT**

Why are the Elks joining this fight?

The Department of Veterans Affairs asked the Elks to help! In September 2015, the Elks signed a Memorandum of Agreement with the VA, pledging to help end veteran homelessness.

THE GOOD NEWS

The VA has made this issue a priority, and provides health care, housing solutions, job training, rent assistance and other supportive services.

They've recruited community partners, and raised awareness.

Since many of these changes began in 2010, veteran homelessness has dropped 36%.

This means . . . ending veteran homelessness is possible! And the Elks can play a part in doing that.

Where to Start

THE DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS

Every VA Medical Center has at least one person on staff whose job is to focus on homeless veterans.

Find your nearest VA facility here: www.va.gov/directory/guide/home.asp

NATIONAL NONPROFITS

Volunteers of America www.voa.org/veterans

The Salvation Army www.salvationarmyusa.org

Catholic Charities www.catholiccharitiesusa.org

Armed Services YMCA www.asymca.org

VETERANS ORGANIZATIONS

The DAV www.dav.org/

The VFW www.vfw.org/

The American Legion www.legion.org/

Vietnam Veterans of America www.vva.org

AmVets www.amvets.org/

Paralyzed Veterans of America www.pva.org

Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America www.iava.org/

LOCAL GROUPS

Many cities, counties and other municipalities have veterans affairs departments.

Look into local, independent nonprofits like veterans rehabilitation and/or transitional shelters.

Or, contact the ENVSC office and we'll put you in touch with someone in your area!

Turn to the next page to read about the personal struggles of a few veterans who have exited homelessness.



You'd be hard pressed to find an American who'd disagree that the words homeless and veteran should never go together. Yet each night in our country—the richest and most powerful in the world—more than 47,000 veterans sleep in shelters, on the streets or in their cars.

These are men and women who served our country—in most cases voluntarily—in peacetime and war. They're home now, but homeless, and they're in a fight for their lives.

V.A. Staff across the country soon will be working with new allies as the Elks mobilize to help the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs eliminate the scourge of homelessness among the veteran population.

Homelessness is not a problem we expect to defeat with money alone, however. It will take a lot of hard work by dedicated volunteers who are willing to provide the support needed not just to put veterans in stable housing but to keep them there.

Many Elks have been in this fight for a long time, but those who are new to the fray will soon learn that homeless veterans look a lot like them.

“There's a lot of stigma around homelessness,” Jenny King, another social worker in North Chicago who manages a caseload of 20 veterans, says. “Many people think this population is crazy or violent. ... Really this is a very recognizable population. They're just like everybody.”



“It's very important for us to support people who were willing to support our country,” adds Gregory Mavromatis.

“It's one of the things that makes America great.”

In many cases, the events that led to their homelessness could have happened to anybody.

“I really think most of us are just one or two problems away from losing our housing,” King says. “You know, if you lose your job and you have health problems. You have health problems and you lose all your family support. You can lose your housing so quickly.”

Jack, who served in the Army from 1971 to 1974, can't argue with that. He had a home in the Chicago suburbs and a decent job, but health problems claimed both.

“I had no clue, you know,” Jack says about the plight of the homeless. “I wasn't homeless, didn't know anything about it. ... I didn't really think about it much. After I [lost] my job and finally became homeless, well, it changed my opinion.”

Jack is one of the V.A.'s many success stories. He's now living in an apartment through the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development-Veterans Affairs Supportive Housing (HUD-VASH) voucher program and tries to help the people he once ignored by volunteering at a homeless shelter run by his church.

"I've been doing it for almost five years now, and I have no reason to stop," he says.

There are currently about 72,000 veterans like Jack in the HUD-VASH program. The V.A. has a wealth of services and programs, like HUD-VASH, to help veterans exit homelessness, but many homeless vets aren't aware that they can turn to the V.A. for help.

Like Jack, Randy, who served in the Marines from 1983 to 1986, lost his job and housing following a health event. He and his wife lived with a friend for a few months, but eventually, they wound up in a shelter program run by churches.

"It was hell," Randy says. "They're doing the best they can ... [but] the place gets jam packed in the winter."

To compound matters, Randy had a wound on his left foot that he couldn't properly treat in the crowded shelter, and his wife needed medication that she couldn't get. Insurance companies require a permanent address, and they didn't have one.

"She's got a lot of things that cause her pain, and I couldn't get any of that," Randy recalls. "I kind of felt like I was dirt back then because I couldn't get it."

V.A. Social Worker Gregory cites bureaucracy as a significant obstacle for the homeless.

"In order to get any Section 8 voucher in this country, one has to have a birth certificate, social security card, an i.d.," he says. "Many people who are currently homeless have either lost this documentation or haven't had it for years.

"If you were born in California and needed a birth certificate," Mavromatis offers as an example, "it takes four to eight weeks to physically get that birth certificate sent to you. And even then, there could be a cost issue because it's not just the \$12. There's also factors that lead a \$12 certificate to be \$50 by the time it gets there."



Talk to landlords in your community and ask them to consider renting to a veteran! In addition to helping, there are also benefits. Learn more at www.va.gov/homeless/docs/landlords_factsheet.pdf.

Fifty dollars may seem like a fair tradeoff for documentation you need to secure housing or insurance coverage, but for someone who's homeless, that's a lot of money.

"I didn't have any money," Randy says. "At all."

Randy's outlook dramatically improved one day when a man from a homeless outreach center walked into the shelter where he and his wife were staying and asked if there were any veterans present.

"I raised my hand," Randy says. "Everything started looking better from there."

He and his wife are now in an apartment and regularly babysit their granddaughter, Isabella, but their descent into homelessness ultimately cost Randy his foot.

Randy didn't know help was available. But even when veterans do turn to the V.A. for help, their homeless histories can complicate the search for housing. For example, they may have recent eviction histories, Mavromatis explains.

"They also may have some criminal histories where a landlord would not want to rent to them," he continues. "And sometimes they have credit issues that may get challenging."

Rickey was in the Air Force from 1987 to 1991 and served during the first Gulf War. When he got home, he couldn't find a job, and when his mother's house burned down, he lost his housing.

Soon, he was diving into dumpsters for food and shelter, breaking into empty houses, and committing misdemeanor crimes, sometimes with the hope of getting caught so that he could spend a few months in a warm cell.

"I was doing things that I never imagined I would ever do," Rickey says. "But I had to do that to stay alive."

Fortunately, the V.A. was able to find a landlord who was willing to take a chance on Rickey despite his record.



RICKEY
AIR FORCE

Mavromatis spends a lot of his time working with landlords, advocating for his clients.

“Literally [going] and talking to the manager of the complex and just saying, this is who we are, this is what we do, these are the people we serve,” Mavromatis says.

“You haven’t worked with us before, here’s the phone number of another landlord who has worked with us for the past two years,” he continues. “Give him a call if you have some questions about whether or not you’re willing to take a risk on tenants you would not normally work with.”

“Our goal is always independent housing, to help people return to independent housing,” King says of the V.A.’s army of social workers.

That army works with veterans who have mental illness, who are addicted to drugs or alcohol, who have health issues.

“We really provide a safe space with enough supportive services so they can move into independent living again with some confidence,” King says.

“We are able to assist veterans in pretty much every way imaginable,” adds Mavromatis of the V.A. “We’re like one-stop shopping. We assist people with their housing issues, their medical needs, their psychiatric needs, their substance abuse needs. When they get older, we have rehab units. We have nursing home units.

“We’re able to assist people in an integrative way. Being a social worker, we’re one cog of a bigger machine to assist veterans.”

Substance abuse is a big problem among homeless vets. In order to receive a HUD-VASH voucher or participate in other programs, homeless veterans need to agree to case management and a treatment plan. The V.A. can provide the treatment, but the vet needs to be a willing participant.

Erin served in the Air Force from 1980 to 1984. In 1993, she had a shattering nervous breakdown and was diagnosed at a community hospital with bipolar disorder. Years later, the V.A. correctly diagnosed her as having Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, but first came drug addiction and chronic homelessness.

“Drugs and alcohol played a major role in this homelessness stuff,” Erin says. “I couldn’t see it [then], but now I do.”

Erin stayed in the domiciliary at the North Chicago V.A. three separate times.



“It got to the point where it was like a revolving door,” she says. “I was sick of it. I got sick of myself, my lifestyle and the things I was doing. So I made a decision that the first thing I had to work on was my sobriety. I’ve been steadfast.”

Once she made the decision to get sober, she was able to see the offered hand up from the V.A. and clasp it.

“They gave me an opportunity, and I am thankful for it,” she says.

Now, she’s living in an apartment through HUD-VASH. When she heard that the Elks would be sitting down with formerly homeless veterans to help share their stories and create awareness of the problem, she jumped at the chance, remembering what the organization had done for her when she was staying at the North Chicago V.A.

“I think the Elks is a wonderful organization,” she says. “They do so much for the veterans ... and I just want to say thank you.”

“Being homeless is really a hopeless feeling,” Erin continues. “It’s despairing. ... You just feel like you’re in the gutter. ... To know that an organization comes out, and they bring food and Christmas presents, they have bingo and they bring ice cream socials. This is what the Elks do for veterans. It gives you some hope. It heightens your spirits a little bit.”

Being homeless can be especially dangerous for female veterans like Erin and Angela, who served in the Army from 1986 to 1990. While in the Army, Angela was raped. She now suffers from Military Sexual Trauma and lives with nearly constant anxiety. Imagine dealing with fear in the wide open, without cover.

“Is someone going to kill me?” asks Angela, who lived in her car when she couldn’t make ends meet. “Is someone going to rape me? Can somebody get in the car when I’m asleep?”



“I would park in the parking lot of the police station,” she laughs. “I still felt unsafe, but at least if something were to happen, they were right there.”

Her case manager helped find her safe and stable housing, but the relationship doesn’t end there for case manager and client.

“I think the Elks is a wonderful organization,” Erin says.
“They do so much for veterans . . . and I just want to say thank you.”

“We help them find affordable housing in the community that they can move into,” picks up King. “If they still need services to support them when they’re in that housing, we have an after-care program as well that kind of checks in on people and makes sure everything is going okay.”

“We do a lot of assistance helping veterans get to appointments and having their needs met,” Mavromatis adds, “but we’re also trying to help foster a level of independence.”

“And if an emergency happens,” King says, “there’s someone there who they can talk to and help prevent them from losing their housing again.”

This after care is one area where the Elks can help to great effect. Providing transportation or bus fare, for example, would free up staff time for more pressing matters.

“Transportation is a big problem,” King says. “Getting people to and from appointments.”

“Ten-ride bus passes, which are about \$20 at this point, things like that,” Mavromatis adds. “If we had several hundred of those a year, that would really not only assist the veterans to get from A to B to get their needs met, but it would also assist the V.A. staff to utilize their time in different ways.”

Randy was fortunate that he had his wife to talk with. Many homeless vets are alone.

Gerald, who served in the Navy from 1976 to

1978 was bipolar without knowing it and couldn’t hold down a job. Eventually, he wound up living in his car.

“You start thinking would haves and could haves and should haves, and what you could have done not to be here,” Gerald says. “That’s one of the worst things about living in your car. You don’t know what’s going on, and it’s very hard to find people to talk to. You can’t just walk down the street and say, ‘Hey, how you doing?’ Because then you’ll see them go, [he pantomimes using a phone] ‘Hello, there’s this weird guy.’”

The loneliness and his inability to keep a job nearly caused Gerald to take his life. Ryan, who served in the Navy from 1989 to 1994 and was on the U.S.S. Midway when we launched Operation Desert Storm, had similar thoughts. Like Gerald and Angela, he was living in his car and had to give up his only friend, a beloved German Shepherd named Bear.

“I felt like I wanted to kill myself,” he recalls.

Gerald and Ryan both turned those dark thoughts away, but too many veterans don’t.

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“If we had several hundred of those a year, that would really not only assist the veterans to get from A to B to get their needs met, but it would also assist the V.A. staff to utilize their time in different ways.”

“There’s a lot of shame involved in becoming homeless,” King says. “You go from, you know, being able to have your own day-to-day existence, you’re very independent, you live on your own, and all of the sudden the people that maybe were a support to you don’t step up or aren’t there anymore. Now you’re living with strangers, usually, and your whole life has changed.”



Veterans can contact the VA's National Call Center for Homeless Veterans at 877/424-3838 to be connected with the nearest VA facility for free.

King believes Elks can help simply by being aware that the V.A. has vast resources to help veterans exit homelessness. The V.A.'s hotline for homeless veterans is especially important to know. (It's 1-877-4AID-VET, 1-877-424-3838.)

She also believes that when talking with homeless veterans, it's important to listen to their needs and to be nonjudgmental.

"Just being willing to listen to people's stories and kind of helping them get to where they can go," she says. "Sitting down and listening to somebody and finding out what they could use, what they best need, because they know better than we do."

Despite the challenges he faced while living in his car and dealing with an undiagnosed illness, Gerald recognizes that he was more fortunate than many homeless veterans.

"I've been blessed in a lot of ways other veterans haven't," Gerald says. "Some of them have gotten in trouble. ... There are some very good vets here who are working on improving themselves, but they're so far behind."

King marvels at how hard her clients are working to catch up.

"I love the amount of dedication the clients I work with have toward getting back on their feet," she says. "We mainly let people kind of guide their own treatment, tell us what their goals are, and then we just partner with them to help them get to



where they're going. We're just there to be the best support we can be for these veterans."

Another way the Elks can best support these veterans is to compile Welcome Home kits for veterans who are moving into housing. Most homeless veterans, Mavromatis says, exit homelessness with nothing.

They can use used furniture, but not used mattresses.

“Having brand-new beds is huge,” Mavromatis says.

Consider raising funds to donate beds to veterans exiting homelessness!

And, hold a supply drive to collect other household items!

They can use used furniture, but not used mattresses. (“Bedbugs are an epidemic,” he says.) The Elks program will provide new mattresses for the kits, if necessary.

“Having brand-new beds is huge,” Mavromatis says.

They also can use a couch, a television, maybe a dresser, a microwave, even a coffee pot. Gift cards to stores like Target and Wal-Mart are also useful as are toiletries, dishes, silverware, toiletries, cleaning products.

“They’re starting with nothing,” Mavromatis says.

Moving nearly 50,000 people who have nothing into safe, stable housing can seem daunting, but King and Mavromatis know it can be done. They’ve been doing it for years. And with the Elks’ help, they know they can keep these veterans in their homes.

King talks about a veteran who came to the V.A. with an alcohol problem. He had lost his housing, his job, and access to his daughter. The V.A. gave him the treatment he needed to get sober and then placed him in a homeless program. Within seven months, he had housing and a full-time job in his field as a manager. Most important, he had access again to his daughter and is able to be an important part of her life.

“Being homeless means you lose a lot of your supports and the people who you love,” King says. “He was able to reclaim that. ... There are very few people who are interested in being homeless for a long time, so being able to see them get back to where they want to be is very gratifying.”





The Elks have pledged \$4 million dollars to fund the Welcome Home program, aimed at ending veteran homelessness. Here are the components of the program.

WELCOME HOME KITS

Most veterans move into their homes with nothing. Elks can help veterans establish their homes by building Welcome Home Kits, helping veterans to settle in with all they need to succeed.

- ▶ Get started by holding a supply drive to collect commonly needed items like bathroom towels, toiletries, paper products, laundry detergent and cleaning supplies.
- ▶ Need help gathering the rest? The ENVSC will reimburse Lodges up to \$200 for Welcome Home Kit supplies they purchase. Access the application at www.elks.org/vets.
- ▶ Moving can be tough. Offer to help transport and set up items on moving day. Know anyone who is moving? Collect furniture, dishes and other home goods they don't need any more and give them to a newly housed veteran.
- ▶ Beds are an especially big need for veterans moving into new homes, as donations generally can't be accepted. Hold a fundraiser to buy beds for newly housed veterans.

ADOPT A VETERAN

Once a veteran is home, it can be difficult to change habits and transition from a life on the street. Veterans may need assistance with independent living and home care skills such as budgeting, opening bank accounts, cooking, cleaning, job seeking and assistance dealing with landlords. Having an Elk as an advocate and friend can help these veterans to thrive in their new home.

- ▶ Include the Lodge phone number and contact information for the Lodge in your Welcome Home Kit.
- ▶ Does your Lodge volunteer at a local Stand Down? Connect with veterans there, and let them know they can call your Lodge for assistance or support.
- ▶ Follow up with veterans the Lodge assists through this program. Visit them at home. Give them a call every few weeks. Invite them to join in when the Elks are assisting other veterans.
- ▶ For more ideas, visit the Adopt-a-Veteran page at www.elks.org/vets.



ELKS HOUSING NAVIGATORS

Elks members interested in providing at least 15 hours of service a month to homeless veterans can sign up to be Elks Housing Navigators. These volunteers will act as mentors and friends to help homeless veterans tackle their challenges, find a home and become integrated into the community.

- ▶ Sign up to volunteer at your local VA. Attend orientation, learn the ropes and volunteer regularly. Ask specifically about opportunities to serve homeless veterans. And, email us at Vets@elks.org.
- ▶ Consider your skills. Do you know local business owners? Help identify jobs for veterans to apply for. Are you good at writing resumes? Hold a workshop, or work one-on-one with job searchers. Have a knack for rallying volunteers? Gather friends together, borrow a truck and help veterans move into their new homes on weekends.
- ▶ Are you well-connected in the community? Help veterans who've recently moved in get to know the local landscape. Introduce them to friends, tell them about local events, and invite them to the Lodge as a guest.
- ▶ Share the basic independent living skills you've gained. Help veterans with things like budgeting, basic cooking and cleaning skills. If it helps, hold workshops once a month.

INCREASED FOCUS ON 8 CITIES

The VA has asked the Elks to focus their efforts in and around the following 8 cities, which they've identified as the areas of highest need. The two programs listed on this page are only available in and surrounding these areas.

CHICAGO

NEW YORK

WASHINGTON, D.C.

LOS ANGELES

LOMA LINDA

SAN FRANCISCO

SEATTLE

MIAMI-DADE

ELKS EMERGENCY ASSISTANCE PROGRAM

Spread the word about the Elks Veterans Emergency Assistance Program. Veterans registered with and receiving services from the Department of Veterans Affairs can apply for one-time monetary assistance to prevent homelessness or secure a home. This program can assist veterans with things like:

- ▶ Rent and security deposits
- ▶ Mortgage payments
- ▶ Essential utilities

All assistance requests must be submitted through the Department of Veterans Affairs, and signed by a VA employee. Forms must be signed by the veteran and by a VA employee. Veterans in the 8 target cities who need this kind of assistance can contact their local VA for details and to access the form.

WELCOME HOME GRANTS

In addition to Freedom Grants, the Elks National Veterans Service Commission is funding additional grants in the areas around the 8 target cities identified above. These grants of up to \$4,500 will be available specifically to assist veterans who are homeless, or at risk of being so. Applications become available online August 1, and are due by May 31, 2017. Here are the requirements:

- ▶ Elk involvement is required.
- ▶ Grant applications must focus on direct service to veterans in need.
- ▶ A complete application and budget must be submitted and approved before funds are mailed.
- ▶ Lodges must complete a Final Report Form, including documentation of all funds spent.
- ▶ Applications available online at www.elks.org/enf/grants.



ELKS NATIONAL VETERANS SERVICE COMMISSION

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Elks pledge to never forget our nation's veterans.
The Elks National Veterans Service Commission takes that pledge one step further,
and promises service to our nation's veterans and military members,
with a special focus on service to those in need.

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