

Ending Military Veteran Homelessness...One County at a Time

By Charlotte County Veteran Services Officer, David W. Donohew

"Who is Homeless," an article by the National Coalition for the Homeless has stated that "On any given night, 271,000 veterans are homeless." This figure comprises 14 percent of the overall homeless population in America.

The homelessness of veterans throughout the United States has been both a problem and an embarrassment for decades. But Charlotte County veteran services and its community partners began a major push ten years ago by making a pledge to help end chronic veteran homelessness in Charlotte County. We need to do better for our nation's warriors and the Charlotte County community has taken this issue up with full force.

In October of 2005, the Charlotte County community held its' first ever Homeless Veteran Stand-Down and on Nov. 1, 2014 they held their tenth, and hopefully last, stand-down. A stand-down provides homeless veterans immediate relief from the trauma and isolation of homelessness and creates an environment where basic necessities are provided and participants can come together in a safe and relaxed atmosphere.

Over the ten year period, through the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), Charlotte County Government, grants and a lot of sweat, many programs have become available to assist this population.

The Volunteers of America in Punta Gorda (now known as the Punta Gorda Veterans Village) is a 24-bed facility that helps homeless veterans transition back into the community. It is a two-year program that has been very productive and has helped many veterans transition to a positive future of independence and determination.

Charlotte County, through the VA, has received 40 HUD/VASH vouchers. The HUD-Veterans Affairs Supportive Housing (HUD-VASH) program combines Housing Choice Voucher (HCV) rental assistance for homeless veterans and their families with case management and clinical services provided by the VA.

Stillwater Veterans House, a Charlotte County property, was our most recent veterans residence to open and houses up to 18 homeless veterans. Under the management of CASL/Renaissance Manor, CASL now offers permanent supported housing for both male and female veterans at the Stillwater property.

In 2013, the Jewish Family and Children Services of the Suncoast, Inc. opened a new Charlotte County office located at 514 Grace Street in Punta Gorda, Florida. As an expansion of JFCS' Operational Military Assistance Program, the Charlotte County office now serves veteran families who are homeless or at imminent risk of becoming homeless with the use of the Supportive Services for Veteran Families Program Federal Grant of \$1.4 million dollars.

The Florence Ryan Fund, through the Charlotte County Veterans Council, has provided \$30,000 in financial aid to needy veterans for rent, electricity and water since 2010. Sadly, this account is almost depleted.

We also cannot forget the tiresome daily work of the Charlotte County Homeless Coalition that caters to all categories of the needy, veterans included.

In addition to all these services and help that is being provided, our Community partners have raised money and funded all 10 stand-downs (approx. \$30,000) and assisted throughout the year with support to needy veterans, buying groceries, paying bills and sometimes just being

companions to a veteran that is alone. It is an outstanding Community that takes Abraham Lincoln's phrase in his second inaugural address to heart: "to care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow, and his orphan" to heart."

Years ago, at the third Homeless Veterans Stand-Down, we had over 100 attend (our highest number). This year, at the tenth one, we had three chronic homeless veterans and two near homeless veterans! The Charlotte County community should be commended for this progress towards ending military veteran homelessness. The Homeless Veterans Stand-Down committee is now discussing if next year there will be a Homeless Veterans Stand-Down since we have pretty much met our goals.

The contribution of federal & local governments, veteran organizations & the private sector partners getting together and achieving these results should show that anything is possible.