Erie County Veterans Services
Newsletter

Volume 2, Issue 1 *Winter 2009*

From
Patrick Welch
Director

It's 2009 and we have a new President. No matter your political persuasion, you have to love our country for how we transition from one administration to another. We wish President Obama the very best and look to moving forward.

Advance Appropriations for the Department of Veterans Affairs is the latest effort that is being discussed for funding of the VA. Not exactly what the veterans' movement desires but it represents a step in the right direction. Keep looking for more information and contact your Congressperson and Senator to express your support.

This issue honors Mary Sobkowiak as our Advocate of the Month for her efforts in memory of SSGT Jason Arnette, US Army who was KIA in Iraq in 2007. Thanks to Mary and her crew of volunteers they made the holidays better for hundreds of our troops in Iraq. (See Page 4)

So if you would like us to recognize a person you feel is deserving as our Veteran Advocate of the Month, we have added a section on our web page for our readers to submit the name of that person. Go to: http://www.erie.gov/veterans/veterans_advocate.asp

Semper Fi

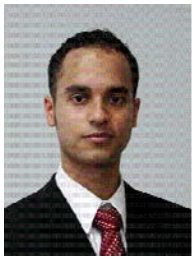
Please distribute this newsletter to your email distribution list.
Anyone who would like to receive this each month can email me at patrick.welch@erie.gov

Remember my mantra: "If you do NOTHING, then someday when you need the VA, then NOTHING is just what you may get." ©

Homeless Veterans in Erie County

By Sergio R. Rodriguez
Deputy Director, Erie County Veterans Service Agency

In this issue of the Erie County Veterans Service Agency newsletter, I take great pride in addressing one of the most overlooked realities facing our veterans today: homelessness. Homelessness affects 195,827 veterans across the United States, according to the latest research compiled by the National Alliance to End Homelessness. While only 8% of America's population is comprised of veterans, they make up an eye-popping 23% of the homeless population – that's nearly three times the average of the civilian homeless population. New York State has a total population of 1,098,272 veterans – 21,147 of these are homeless. New York State also has the distinction of being ranked 9th on the list of states with the highest percentage of homeless veterans. Buffalo, officially named the second poorest city in America according to the U.S. Census Bureau, has its fair share of homeless veterans.



In order to attain a more realistic perspective about the issues facing the homeless veterans population here in Erie County, I embarked on a journey of discovery. I first started by visiting the Health Care for Homeless Veterans Program located at 1298 Main Street. It is appropriately situ-

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ated on the third floor of the building that houses the St. Vincent DePaul's soup kitchen. The program's mission is to provide "supportive services for homeless veterans in our communities". A push of a button located right outside of the building will prompt the receptionist to buzz you inside. When fellow service officer Alyssa Ersing and I arrived at the Homeless Vets Center, we were welcomed by a friendly receptionist named Peggy. Peggy then introduced us to the program's coordinator, Herb Wittmeyer, who greeted us with a friendly smile and granted a tour of the facility.

"While only 8% of America's population is comprised of veterans, they make up an eye-popping 23% of the homeless population"

The tour began with a showcase of the lounge area used by veterans to come in, relax and grab a cup of coffee while they take a break from the often gruesome weather and rough streets that adorn the nearby area. This place serves as a refuge of sorts for veterans who oftentimes feel belittled or demeaned by many of those whom they encounter in the outside world on a day-to-day basis. The tour continued with a look towards a room that lies right outside the reception area of the vet center. There, I was shown a laundry room reserved for use by homeless veterans. The laundry room became a reality through the efforts of the local American Veterans Organization (Amvets), who donated the washer and dryer. The laundry room is also connected to a shower for homeless veterans. As the tour continued, I encountered a gulf-war era veteran making use of a computer resource lab, which again was graciously donated by the local Amvets organization.

National Coalition for Homeless Veterans

We sat down in a meeting area where Herb introduced us to the center's HUD-VASH (Veterans Affairs Supportive Housing) Coordinator, Donna Sherman and its Program Manager of Community Day Programs, Jill Murray. Here, we discussed the various programs and services offered to our homeless veterans. The center has been assigned with distributing HUD-VASH vouchers for qualified veterans who are in need of a place to stay. This program also provides a case worker assigned to the veteran with the ability to save them from eviction and set them up with public assistance *before* they become homeless.

Additionally, the center partners with the Department of Labor to facilitate job opportunities that provide preference consideration for veterans. Through partnerships with local veterans' agencies and organizations, the center provides significant mental health, substance abuse and readjustment counseling and resources. The center also provides a limited supply of winter clothing for veterans in need. The computer resource lab is often used by the veterans to search for housing opportunities or craft resumes. Special programs such as these are funded through a 'general post fund', which is replenished by donations made by local service organizations and individual donors.

National Alliance to End Homelessness

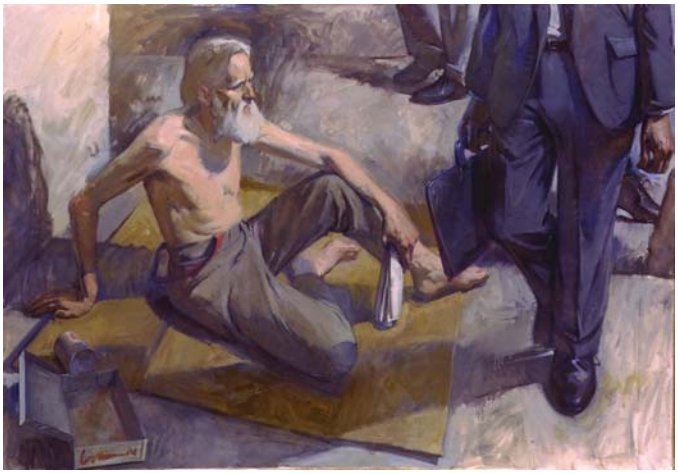
So, what makes a veteran get to the point of homelessness? To answer this question, I was given the opportunity to speak with a veteran that has experienced being homeless recently. The gentleman, who goes by the name of John, served during the Vietnam era between 1960 and 1964—as he points out, this was around the time that President Kennedy was assassinated. John presents an interesting case as a homeless veteran. After leaving the service, he lived in Canada for 18 years and led a very successful life. However, John did not lead the life of just one person. During his years in Canada, he could be identified by five aliases and used three different names for official matters. When Canadian authorities finally caught on to what was happening, they stripped him of everything he had. After years of legal battles the Canadian government deported him back to the states.

When John arrived in Buffalo, he had nary a cent to his name. He experienced a culture shock from having been away from the American way of life for so long. As he walked up the streets of down-

town Buffalo he figured they were filming a movie. "Why?" I asked. He tells me that in Toronto, they often must close off the streets to accommodate filming crews as they prepared to film a ghost town scene, and that is what downtown Buffalo reminded him of. I laughed it off, as I pictured the walled-up empty office spaces of the City's Main Street.

US Department of Veterans Affairs

John lacked proper paperwork and identification documents, so it was very difficult for him to be considered for most social programs. Additionally, he was in need of prescribed heart medication that he could not afford. With nowhere to turn, John stumbled upon the doors of the homeless veterans program. Here, he was able to request a copy of his military discharge papers and was also given guidance as to how to obtain a picture I.D. from the VA healthcare administration on Bailey Avenue. These two documents allowed him to apply for social services and social security benefits. In the meantime, he found a temporary stay at Buffalo's City Mission. John now lives comfortably in an apartment in Buffalo and volunteers some of his time to assist other homeless veterans. "The VA owed me nothing... I never thought that I was entitled to anything – and now..." he pauses, realizing that if Canadian authorities had their way with him, he could have



been locked up in jail for up to ten years, "...This is the most peaceful year I've had in almost twenty years".

Don, a veteran who had lost his job as an automotive industry employee also became a victim of homelessness. After having spent 23 years of his life in San Antonio he moved to Buffalo in search of a new life. Consequently, this forced him to look for jobs in other industries, such as putting up plastic fencing and seeking employment at numerous temporary agencies. Herb Wittmeyer was instrumental in getting Don some much needed assistance during a time of need. To this day, he still wakes up in fear and sweat from the explosions and sounds of fireworks during the 4th of July Holiday. Today, he considers himself a graduate of Buffalo's Homeless Veterans Program. He also volunteers much of his time at the center. Herb, he tells me, is a testament to Buffalo's heritage as the "City of Good Neighbors."

Their stories, however, are not reflective of how most veterans arrive to the state of homelessness. Vietnam Veterans who sacrificed so much for their country, were not welcomed home as heroes or liberators. The unpopular war often led people to focus misplaced hatred on those who put up their very lives to defend

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CBS NEWS

Online

Veterans Make Up 1 in 4 Homeless
Story 11/07/2007

More Veterans Calling the Streets Home
Story 3/25/2007

Homeless Vets
Video 3/25/2007

From Hero to Homeless
Story 3/25/2005

From Hero to Homeless
Video 3/25/2005

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their country, regardless of where they were sent to fight. This feeling of rejection led many to escape society and enter into a state of solidarity. Like John, they too, found nowhere to turn to. Ironically, the streets offered an inner-sanctum—a private place where no one judges you. This state of depression leads many veterans of this particular era to be diagnosed with PTSD. It's a vicious cycle: they serve their country, but their country often fails to serve them. Today's heroes are often misunderstood and can hardly find anyone that they can relate with. Homelessness can sometimes be a step closer to another major epidemic affecting our veterans today: suicide. In our next issue of the Erie County Veterans Service Agency Newsletter, I will be discussing the alarming rate of suicide amongst our veterans population and what we can do about it.

WHAT YOU CAN DO TO HELP THE LOCAL HOMELESS VETERANS POPULATION:

- Volunteer your time at local soup kitchens and shelters.
- Donate money, clothes or foods to local veterans organizations that support homeless programs, such as the American Veterans or the Health Care for Homeless Veterans Program.
- Advocate by encouraging your local legislator to craft policies that address the needs of homeless people.
- Employ local veterans at your company. Hire a vet!
- Respect those who are homeless and be kind to them**.** Most of the damage resulting from homelessness is caused by the feeling of being treated as though they don't exist. Take a few minutes to get to know them and ask how you can help them.

Visit our website's Homeless Veterans resource page to find out more.

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Facts About Veterans and Homelessness

23%	of homeless population are veterans
33%	of male homeless population are veterans
47%	Vietnam Era
17%	post Vietnam
15%	pre Vietnam
67%	served three or more years
33%	stationed in war zone
25%	have used VA Homeless Services
85%	completed high school/GED compared to 56% of non-veterans
89%	received Honorable Discharge
79%	reside in central cities
16%	reside in suburban areas
5%	reside in rural areas
76%	experience alcohol, drug, or mental health problems
46%	white males compared to 34% non-veterans
46%	age 45 or older compared to 20% non-veterans
Service needs:	
45%	help finding job
37%	finding housing

Source: National Alliance to End Homelessness Website

Jason's Care Packages

Mary Sobkowiak and her team at Kaleida Health

Veterans Advocate of the Month— Mary Sobkowiak

The Erie County Veterans Service Agency would like to recognize Mary Sobkowiak as the ***Veterans Advocate of the Month*** for January.

Mary works in Kaleida's Employee Benefits Department. She has been instrumental in implementing a program named ***Jason's Care Packages*** here in the Buffalo region to ensure that our troops overseas receive much appreciated goods from home. Among other things, these packages contain products such as non-perishable foods and daily hygiene items.

This campaign is in honor and memory of Jason R. Arnette, a U.S. Army soldier who died on April 1, 2007, while on patrol in Iraq.

Jason's story began when he told his mother about how some soldiers were not getting packages from home. Mary has been keeping Jason's memory and spirit alive by ensuring that our troops are being taken care of while overseas.

With these packages, Mary brings a sense of American home comfort and culture to our troops overseas. Thank you, Mary for keeping Jason's story of compassion for America's heroes alive.

Toxins Linked to Gulf War Illness

A landmark 450-page report released by a federal panel of scientific experts and veterans concludes that at least one-fourth of the nearly 700,000 military personnel who served in the Persian Gulf War have complex but real health problems that can be scientifically linked to the toxins to which they were exposed. The Congressionally mandated report, "Research Advisory Committee on Gulf War Veterans' Illnesses," clearly states that Gulf War illness was caused by unique exposures and that Gulf War illness is not a stress related or trauma condition.

The full report is available in PDF format at the Boston University School of Public Health website. Warning: Due to size, it takes a few minutes for the report to download.

New Website for the Purple Heart

http://www.thepurpleheart.com/

This site was created for those who would like a better understanding of the Purple Heart, the National Purple Heart Hall of Honor and of the men and woman who have served and are now serving in our Armed Forces.

- Where those who have been wounded in any war may leave their personal story as to how and where they were wounded as a shared legacy.
- Where those thousands of readers including school kids may read these stories and realize the human service, sacrifice and suffering of those that bore arms in the defense of the freedoms that they are now enjoying.

On this site you will be able to communicate with some of these veterans and non veterans who have shared an experience first hand through stories by utilizing the our Discussion Board or get together in the Chat Room. There is a Forum area where you can communicate directly with the National Purple Heart Hall of Honor's Staff to ask questions or give your comments.

For those who have visited the Hall, you will be able to share your visit by uploading images and

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describing your experience within our Image Gallery or write a short note in our Guest Book.

Some of you will not have the opportunity to visit the Hall, to walk through the many exhibits or get a chance to interact with the onsite knowledgeable staff . So to try to give you the next best thing, I have created a "Virtual Image Tour" of their facility. This is in its beginning stages and will be periodically updated. We hope to eventually make this a complete Virtual Tour of the Hall along with captions, interviews and video footage.

As you visit this website, I hope you can gain a better insight of what it means to be presented the Purple Heart and of those who have received it. Please pass the word to your friends, neighbors, and other veteran related websites that you know of so we all can enjoy. While you visit our site be sure to sign up for our Bi-Monthly E-Newsletter, the link is located on the Main Page.

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Erie County Veterans Services

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Mission Statement of the Erie County Veterans Service Agency

To insure that every veteran in the county is registered in the VA System and is fully aware of all the benefits that they have earned.

To make veterans an economic force in education, employment and business development.

Notable Western New Yorkers

This month……

John Paul Bobo
Medal of Honor Recipient

February 14, 1943 – March 30, 1967 (aged 24)

A Second Lieutenant in the Marine Corps, Bobo enlisted while attending Niagara University in 1965 and was commissioned second lieutenant following his graduation.

In 1967, Bobo served in Vietnam as a platoon commander, where he was mortally wounded firing his weapon into enemy attack. Bobo refused to be evacuated after his right leg was severed and demanded he continue to cover his troops.

Because of his courage, he was posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor. Bobo is also the namesake of a class of Maritime Prepositioning Ships. He is buried in the Gate of Heaven Cemetery in Lewiston.

Source:
200 Years 200 Faces, A Special Bicentennial Edition; Published by the Lockport Union-Sun & Journal, The Niagara Gazette and the Tonawanda News

IT TAKES THE COURAGE AND STRENGTH OF A WARRIOR TO ASK FOR HELP…

If you're in an emotional crisis,
call **1-800-273-TALK** (Press "1" for Veterans)
www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org