

PRESS RELEASE

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Kitsap Initiative Aims to End Veteran Homelessness

A recent outreach project to survey veterans living without shelter in Kitsap County revealed that 45 veterans are homeless and living in situations not meant for human habitation. The outreach project was part of a local initiative to end homelessness for veterans, called *Homes for All Who Served*. It's being spearheaded by a coalition of agencies who are dedicated to housing veterans, including the Kitsap County Veterans Advisory Board, the Washington Department of Veteran Affairs, the Veterans Administration, and a wide range of Kitsap housing and social service providers.

The project kicked off with Bremerton Mayor Patty Lent joining elected officials across the nation in signing the Mayors Challenge to End Veterans Homelessness, a national initiative sponsored by HUD, the United States Inter-Agency Council on Homelessness, and the Veterans Administration. The National Association of County Officials also supports strategies for ending veteran homelessness. Mayor Lent commented, "Signing onto the Mayor's Challenge allows the City of Bremerton to acknowledge the service of our Veterans, by now being of service to them. They deserve honor and a home when they return home from keeping us safe." Bainbridge Island Mayor, Anne Blair, and the Board of County Commissioners have also signed on to the effort. "This is just one effort to raise awareness of the needs of our veterans and to address a growing affordable housing crisis in our community," said Rob Gelder, Chair of the Board of County Commissioners.

There is specific criteria for ending veteran homelessness, called "functional zero", which means that a community has strategies to help all unsheltered veterans who want housing immediately, and resources and referrals are in place to help all veterans who need housing assistance in the future. Around the country, cities and counties are announcing success at achieving this goal.

In mid-2015 Kirsten Jewell, Housing and Homelessness Program Coordinator for Kitsap County, convened an initial stakeholders meeting for organizations serving veterans to rally around this goal. Says Jewell, "There was such enthusiastic response to improving coordination between organizations and expanding ways to assist homeless veterans. Veterans are such an important part of our Kitsap community; we all want to ensure that none of them has to endure homelessness."

That initial stakeholders meeting evolved into a regular committee who recently named their initiative *Homes for All Who Served*. The group organized the outreach survey project, coordinates efforts between organizations serving veterans, and is working to finalize a plan to end veteran homelessness.

In 2015 Kitsap County was awarded 7 additional Veterans Assistance Supportive Housing Vouchers (a joint program between HUD and the VA for veterans coming out of homelessness) through the Bremerton Housing Authority (BHA). Kurt Wiest, Executive Director of BHA noted, "We now have 42 VASH Vouchers. However, we need double or triple that number to meet the current need. Kitsap is one of the few counties in the country to transition people from VASH vouchers to regular Housing

Choice Vouchers. Then the VASH Vouchers are assigned to new homeless veterans to maximize the number of people we can assist.”

As part of federal support for this effort, Kitsap is the beneficiary of a HUD grant of additional funding for rental assistance for veterans through the Supportive Services for Veteran Families (SSVF) program, managed by the Metropolitan Development Council and Catholic Community Services. Starting operations in May 2015, the SSVF program has housed 18 veterans so far.

VASH vouchers and SSVF rental assistance funds are paid to private property owners with rental units. Mayor Lent noted, “Landlords are key partners in providing rental units for veterans who are being supported by agencies that provide counselling, job search and financial assistance to keep our veterans whole.” Additional landlords willing to work with agencies who are assisting homeless veterans are needed. “Without additional private market rental housing, ending homelessness for veterans is going to be very difficult,” Wiest commented.

Landlords and property owners who are interested in the *Homes for All Who Served* project, can contact Jackie Fojtik, at the Housing Solutions Center (HSC), at 360-473-2035. The Housing Solutions Center of Kitsap County is a one-stop program for people experiencing homelessness and housing instability to be linked with social services and affordable housing resources.

The national Mayors Challenge has a target of housing all veterans by the end of 2015. Jewell said, “Realistically, in Kitsap, we are setting the goal of housing all veterans by Veterans Day 2016. We have lots of great resources for veterans, but we are also missing some critical pieces at this point.” Nationally a model of “housing first, treatment second” is proving the most successful for veterans with complex mental health disorders, often co-occurring with physical health issues or substance abuse disorders. Once veterans and their families are stably housed, then treatment providers can assist them with the issues that contributed to their homelessness. Noted Jewell, “It is difficult to successfully address these issues when someone is living outside. We need more “Housing First” programs in Kitsap if we want to be able to help these most vulnerable veterans.”

In the 2015 annual census of homeless persons, called the Point in Time Count and conducted over a 24 hour period, 106 individuals who were living outside were surveyed, including nine veterans. During the first half of 2015, 139 veteran households requested housing assistance through the Housing Solutions Center, including 43 households (comprising 60 individuals) who were unsheltered and 32 households (79 individuals) who were imminently at risk of losing their housing.

Stacey James, Kitsap County Veterans Assistance Program Coordinator, commented that “During the September 26th Stand Down at the Kitsap County fairgrounds, of the 208 veterans who completed the survey/registration form, 52 of the veterans served were homeless and approximately 109 met the Department of Health and Human Services poverty threshold.” The next Stand Down is scheduled for April 2016.

Veterans who need assistance with housing should contact the Housing Solutions Center at 360-473-2035 or drop-in to the weekly Veterans Housing Options Group at Kitsap Community Resources (1201 Park Street, Bremerton) at 1pm every Monday, connecting veterans with housing resources.

National Hunger and Homelessness Awareness Week is November 16 – 22, 2015. A number of activities will be held to raise awareness of these issues that affect many people in Kitsap, culminating in a Hunger and Homelessness Awareness Walk on November 21, starting at 10am at the Our Lady Star of the Sea Church, 1513 6th Street, Bremerton. More information is available from the Bremerton Salvation Army.

Additional statistics and information about homelessness in Kitsap is available on the Kitsap County website: www.kitsapgov.com/hs/housing/housing_grant.htm

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