



Housing Our Heroes

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At any given moment, a large number of Americans are overseas, separated from their families for extended periods of time. In addition to giving up a peaceful life surrounded by their families, these people are willing to sacrifice their lives, and many of them do, driven by an intense love for and desire to protect their country. You would expect that these courageous men and women would be warmly welcomed and accorded all necessities for a comfortable life, given everything that they have done for their country. Unfortunately, this assumption is incorrect. In fact, veterans are at a higher risk for homelessness compared to the general population. They are overrepresented even within the homeless population itself, as veterans account for approximately 9.5% of the United States adult population, yet account for 12% of the homeless adult population.¹

This is extremely surprising, as veterans are consistently found to be older, better educated, and more likely to have health coverage than other homeless adults, all of which should reduce the risk of homelessness among veterans in comparison to the general population. So what accounts for this incongruity? According to the United States Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), the most prominent risk factors for homelessness are substance abuse and mental health issues.²

In many cases, mental health issues and substance abuse among veterans are very much related. The VA estimates that almost 31% of Vietnam veterans, 10% of Gulf War veterans, 11% of Afghanistan War veterans, and 20% of Iraqi War veterans are afflicted with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, or PTSD.³ PTSD commonly results from traumatic experiences, and often causes people to relive their trauma during the day or in nightmares even years after they first experienced it. In order to cope with the troublesome state of their mind, veterans experiencing PTSD often begin drinking heavily, using drugs, or smoking excessively.⁴ In addition to worsening their state of health, these behaviors also increase veterans' risk for homelessness, even more so when combined with some sort of mental illness such as PTSD.

In light of the increased risk of homelessness among the veteran population, we must consider what possible solutions could be implemented to mitigate this crisis. According to the United States Interagency Council on Homelessness, or USICH, ending Veteran homelessness is both highly conceivable and sustainable, as evident from case studies of over thirty different communities who have taken steps to significantly reduce homelessness among the Veteran population.⁵ One important step is implementing a "Housing First" System, which is based on the premise that a necessary step in reducing the homelessness crisis among Veterans is to provide homeless Veterans with housing before providing them with help in getting jobs or treatment for addiction and medical issues.⁶ Furthermore, a "Coordinated Entry" System can work in tandem with the Housing First System in order to reduce homelessness among Veterans by using a common assessment process to match individuals and families experiencing homelessness to appropriate housing.⁶ In order to achieve these goals, collaboration among local, state, and federal programs is necessary. With a common goal and a conceivable plan to provide housing to homeless Veterans, we can reduce the prevalence of this crisis in American society.

All in all, homelessness is not only a serious issue among the general population of Americans, but among the Veteran population as well. Largely driven by substance abuse and/or mental health problems, many of our Veterans are left bereft of a place to call home. This is extremely depressing and should not continue any longer. As United States citizens, it is our moral obligation to make an effort to improve the lives of those who have devoted their lives to protecting ours. Through the implementation of programs such as Housing First and Coordinated Entry, we may very well be able to achieve this goal. However, this will require local, state, and federal support, which we as a people can obtain if we work together to lobby for the rights of Veterans and spread awareness regarding the homelessness crisis among the Veteran population. After all of the sacrifices made by Veterans for our benefit, this is the least we can do.

Works Cited

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