



Regional group seeks home for homeless vets

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By *Peter Hirschfeld* Vermont Press Bureau

BARRE – They walk side streets and railways during the day, carrying their few belongings in a tattered knapsack or old grocery cart.

At night, they sleep underneath bridges in Montpelier, or on untended tracts between the beltline and railroad in Barre.

The homeless veterans populating central Vermont lay low for the most part. Many area residents aren't even aware of the transients in their midst. But Patrick Miner, an Army veteran who spent a good deal of time in the streets himself, says it's time for the central Vermont community to take a better look.

"The reason society doesn't see it is because society doesn't want to see it," says Miner, now living in a modest one-bedroom apartment in downtown Barre. "People might notice one of these guys on the street, or under a bridge, and think they're just a bum. They're not bums. They're human beings that fought for their country and then got discarded by society."

Miner is among a group of area volunteers that formed The Veterans' Place, Inc. The nonprofit is working to build a home for some of the estimated 30 homeless veterans living in and around Barre and Montpelier. They have until April 4 to raise the \$200,000 in local funding needed to qualify for a \$400,000 federal Veterans Administration grant.

"Our objective is to provide them a transitional facility that will enable them to get established in life," says Rev. Ralph Howe.

Howe's Hedding United Methodist Church in Barre has already committed \$10,000 toward the effort. Many businesses and trade workers in the area have pledged services, be it plumbing, drywall or architectural drawings, to get the facility up and running if the grant comes through.

"We believe that given a safe, trusting environment, where all the supports are present, that folks can make a transition into a little better life than living on streets," Howe says.

Veterans comprise about one-quarter of the nation's homeless people, according to government statistics. In Vermont, an estimated 150 veterans of various wars live on the streets, and many fought in Vietnam, according to the backers of The Veteran's Place. But Howe says the homeless population in central Vermont includes veterans of Desert Storm and even the more recent war in Iraq.

"Many of them are Vietnam veterans at this point, but we are deeply concerned that the men and women coming back from the Middle East with post-traumatic stress disorder and other issues and will end up in a similar place," Howe says.

Right now, the only place in Vermont designated for homeless veterans is an eight-bed home in Rutland, called the Dodge House. Jack McDermott spent 30 years in the military and now serves on the state's Veterans Advisory Council.

HOW TO HELP

Tax-deductible cash donations can be sent to: The Veterans' Place, Inc., 40 Washington St., Barre, VT 05641.

"There's a gap there and we're trying to fill it," says McDermott, of Moretown.

McDermott's council lobbied Gov. James Douglas for \$200,000 in state funds to qualify for the VA grant. The Administration was unable to locate the funds in this tight budget year.

"That put us behind the eight ball, because we need \$200,000 in the kitty to put this grant in," McDermott says. "We've got to do something, whether it's this year or next year. These people come back from war, and this is one case where we're not serving them as well as they served us."

Homeless veterans may suffer a number of problems, from mental health issues to substance abuse. McDermott says the planned home, to be run by veterans for veterans, will offer the primarily male clientele access to job training, financial management classes and the mental and physical healthcare they need to get their lives on track.

"It's painful to see men ... who have served their country and are so emotionally and spiritually damaged by war that they're not able to experience the benefits of our society," Howe says. "We see a lot of fellas who are wonderful people, whose lives have been permanently altered by war, and we would like to help them find some peace and rest and joy in life again."

Howe and his collaborators have identified a number of possible sites for the proposed 15-bed veterans home, which will likely be in either Barre or Montpelier. The Veterans' Place needs donations of cash and services between now and April 4 to make the building a reality. Donations are tax deductible, and the cash value of pledged services counts toward the \$200,000 goal.

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