

Military Service and Ending Veteran Homelessness, a matter of National Security

About 70 percent of 18-25 year-olds who might consider joining the military are ineligible for service due to unhealthy living. That leaves a dearth of eligible candidates for military service. The remaining 30 percent, enjoy the benefit of a decent economy, relatively low unemployment, and expanded college options as alternatives. So imagine being a young person in Washington DC, where you're more likely to encounter a homeless veteran than an Army recruiter. On the one hand you may learn that military service offers money, travel, new skills, and a noble purpose, and on the other hand you may see the impacts of danger, prolonged separation from family, red tape when seeking earned benefits, and possible health problems. Not to mention the risk of becoming one of the 22-a-day who commit suicide or becoming one of the homeless veteran population.

Veteran homelessness is a vivid barrier to recruitment because it is a most visible problem in our society. Hearing about the litany of problems some veterans face is one thing. Suicide is the 10th largest cause of death in the US, with veterans accounting for 18% of all deaths by suicide. Passing a homeless person on the street is a more common experience than knowing a veteran who has actually committed suicide. Whether one chooses to avert his eyes as he passes by to avoid making a connection, or she drops a five-dollar-bill in a beggar's cup as she leaves the coffee shop with a seven-dollar "triple mocha something sweet," in hand, the person is forced to acknowledge that homeless veterans are alive and living in Washington, DC. Add the baseball cap indicating service during a time of war, or the sign they hold in their hand noting prior military service and requesting help, and one tends to associate service with homelessness which may lead to a lack of desire to serve one's country by many eligible candidates.

A shortage of affordable housing, no access to a living wage, an inability to manage mental health challenges, and a lack of family and social support are the general causes of veteran homelessness. Mental health issues that are unique to veterans, substance abuse abetted by the over prescription of addictive drugs in the VA Hospital System, medical problems linked to over vaccination while in active duty environments, and managing the transition from military to civilian employment increase the likelihood that too many veterans will fall to the margins of society. We want to end veteran homelessness to repay a debt that has been left outstanding, and so that it will no longer be a barrier to those who are eligible and willing to serve their country.

We hope drawing attention to this issue will empower military applicants, military members, veterans and civilians to appreciate the collective need to end veteran homelessness. We want more people to see the fundamentally human aspects of this challenge. Do you see them? Do you show love for them? One veteran, named Louis, an example of such humanity as he walked to the podium, gray hair neatly brushed in place, a well-fitting blazer, posture poised, streamlined and graceful. He personified a bold confidence after overcoming the mental health challenges that had led him to a homeless shelter and later a transitional and permanent supportive housing home for men at Veterans On the Rise, a DC-based organization that offers holistic recovery and reintegration for displaced veterans. That day, he was reading poetry penned during a sleepless night; literary work that rivaled the creative genius one might find in some of the best college and university settings like Northwestern or Columbia.

His comfortable, calm, and congenial demeanor belied his experience as a homeless veteran. He'd entered the military fifteen years ago with the intention of making it a career. However, his mental health would slow these ambitions. Though he started off as the person his fellow service members leaned on for help when times got tough, when he needed help due to illness his family and friends were in no position to assist him, or at least that is the excuse they gave. Despite a feeling of exile and estrangement, Louis,

whose name means renowned warrior, maintained hope that he would find a path out of the darkness of his current challenges in homelessness. People literally walked past him on the street who had no idea that his IQ was 165, or of his ability to move people with his unique, artistic talent, as they walked on by. That's how it happens. And those who dismiss Louis or, worse yet, decide to forego joining the military based on an unexplored perception of his narrative ultimately contribute to a growing crisis involving our national security.

Military recruitment patterns tend to ebb and flow with our need for members increasing during times of war and decreasing during peace times. The challenges that bring veterans into a state of homelessness or suicide seem to be directly correlated with the amount of time it takes a veteran to transition into a gainful employment opportunity post service. The shorter the transition and the more sustainable the transition, the less likely the veteran will encounter homelessness or severe mental health issues. While the conflicts have significantly wound down, the residual effects can be seen in VA hospitals, suicide statistics, veteran homeless programs — and the choice that a growing number of young people are making not to serve in the military.

Ending veteran homelessness is a serious matter that requires civilians, veterans, and active duty service communities alike to do their part in helping veterans like Louis and others to see their way into sunnier days. Paying respect to our military and veterans on Memorial Day, Veterans Day, on the Fourth of July, and other memorable dates in our country's proud military history is to be commended, and we need more than symbolic gestures on Federal holidays and other esteemed occasions. Confronting the problems requires an ongoing, concerted effort from those who care to go the extra mile, every week of the year, and to show their gratitude to veterans through more than an obligatory "thank you for your service." One way to start is by actively supporting efforts such as the "AMVETS HEAL Program" and "Veterans On the Rise Keeping Veterans Rising Campaign" to end veteran suicide.

General Washington once said, "A nation is judged by how well it treats its veterans." Among those who will judge are the 18-25 year-olds who will continue the fight. The young people are watching how we treat those who fought for our freedom, whether they're sitting in a wheelchair at a parade or lying on the sidewalk wearing an olive, threadbare, field jacket. Remember that, the next time a veteran reaches out to you for help, for the sake of our country.

Learn more:

<https://www.globalgiving.org/projects/keeping-veterans-rising-ending-suicides/>
www.veteransontherise.org

<http://amvets.org/vet-heal/>

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