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# The New England Shelter for Homeless Veterans

## A Unique Approach

*Ken Smith*

*James M. Yates*

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*It has been estimated that veterans comprise one third of the homeless population. To combat this national disgrace, many small veterans' groups have been formed nationwide to serve their homeless "brothers" in such settings as shelters, group homes, and outreach centers.*

*A Boston group, the Vietnam Veterans Workshop, based its New England Shelter for Homeless Veterans on the simple but powerful concept of veteran helping veteran. The shelter created a program to accomplish three important functions: providing the basic necessities of a bed, a meal, clothing, and a hot shower; rehabilitating the veterans by offering various activities to comfort and motivate each one to take positive steps in life; and finally, healing the veterans who still feel the effects of their war experiences by designing a program to address the needs of those suffering from posttraumatic stress disorder.*

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**A**t the conclusion of Oliver Stone's Academy Award-winning film *Platoon*, the main character, played by Charlie Sheen, delivered a heartfelt soliloquy. As a helicopter carried him away from the fighting that had made his tour in Vietnam such a terrible and memorable experience, he looked toward the future: "Those of us who did make it have an obligation to build again. To teach others what we know, and try, with what's left of our lives, to find a goodness and a meaning to this life."<sup>1</sup>

This challenge to Vietnam veterans has been taken up by a Boston group, the Vietnam Veterans Workshop, which has concentrated on finding innovative and effective ways to fight homelessness in the veteran community. To this end, the workshop founded the New England Shelter for Homeless Veterans, specifically targeting the veterans who are part of the homeless population. In this article we examine the problem of homelessness in the veteran community, then tell what is being done throughout the country to fight this national disgrace. Finally, we turn our attention to the Vietnam Veterans Workshop to share the methods and programs we have devised to serve and rehabilitate homeless veterans.

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## The Problem

Studies in the mid- to late-1980s estimated that veterans comprise one third of the homeless population.<sup>2</sup> According to the U.S. government, there are approximately 150,000 to 250,000 homeless veterans throughout the country “on any given night.”<sup>3</sup> Men and women who once served and fought for this country are homeless! While these statistics are shocking, they correspond roughly to the percentage of veterans in the entire population (32%).<sup>4</sup> In just over a year, the New England Shelter for Homeless Veterans alone has served more than 1,600 veterans at its downtown Boston site. Although the heaviest concentrations are found in urban areas, homeless veterans can also be found in rural and suburban areas in every state of the union.<sup>5</sup> The depth and extent of the problem of homeless veterans more than justifies the need for a national policy to address this issue.

Veterans, like others, are homeless because of a variety of factors, such as lack of affordable housing, unemployment or underemployment, chemical dependency, health problems, and mental illness. Homeless veterans are largely no different from the rest of the homeless population. Most have gone through a series of hardships and been affected by many elements that contribute to their homelessness. Although common experiences can cause people’s homelessness, there is one major difference between homeless veterans and the rest of the homeless: the homeless veterans’ records of service and sacrifice in defense of their country. America must respect the veterans’ contributions. As stated in a *Boston Globe* editorial, “It is a travesty that any American should be forced to live in the street; it is a travesty and an insult when those who have fought our country’s wars are forced to do so.”<sup>6</sup> The federal government has a responsibility and obligation to create a national program for homeless veterans in recognition of their service.

One factor leading to homelessness that specifically concerns many veterans is the lingering effect of their combat experiences on their psyches. Posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is most likely to affect Vietnam veterans, many of whom have never become reconciled to their military service in an unpopular war. Symptoms of this condition include depression, isolation, rage, avoidance of feelings (alienation), survival guilt, anxiety reactions, sleep disturbances, nightmares, and intrusive thoughts.<sup>7</sup> According to the National Coalition for the Homeless, Vietnam veterans with PTSD are particularly prone to becoming homeless at some point in their lives.<sup>8</sup> Although this condition can be treated through group counseling and individual therapy, it is difficult to provide outreach and assistance to homeless veterans. Many are alienated by the Veterans Administration and its programs. (Its official designation has been changed to Department of Veterans Affairs, but the agency is still referred to as the VA.) Most have no other avenue to find help in dealing with PTSD.

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## An Emerging National Issue

Increased concern for veterans of previous wars, especially Vietnam, followed Operation Desert Storm. Although some disagreed with the decision to go to war, support for the troops in the Gulf was always strong. The American public had finally separated the warrior from the war, which was not done during the Vietnam War. Many tried to use this occasion to give Vietnam veterans a proper welcome home, which they had never received. This attempt by people to reconcile their feelings

about the Vietnam War was good for the nation and especially for those who fought in it. Amid this friendly environment, signs of a national movement are becoming evident.

In the past few years, many small veterans groups have concentrated their efforts on the plight of the homeless veteran. Attacking the problem in many innovative and different ways, they organize and run shelters, group homes, and centers catering exclusively to veterans and their needs. The National Coalition of Homeless Veteran Service Providers, formed in April 1991, has members in thirty-nine cities across the country. According to Bill Elmore of the Vietnam Veterans Leadership Program in St. Louis, "Just as the G.I. Bill preceded other student loan programs, these programs could presage a broader national effort."<sup>9</sup> With the national support of Desert Storm veterans still apparent and the success of direct service ventures, the coalition may be able to force the federal government to give the issue of homeless veterans the priority it should have.

In addition to the work of the Vietnam Veterans Workshop in the Greater Boston area, many innovative programs serve homeless veterans. One of the most creative and successful is Standdown, a project designed by the Vietnam Veterans of San Diego. Once a year, for three days, a host of public and private agencies meet in an encampment to provide services to San Diego-area homeless veterans. The services deal extensively with every concern they may have, including medical examinations, legal counseling, employment counseling, social services (both state and federal agencies), substance-abuse programs, veterans benefits counseling from the VA, mental health counseling, food, and clothing. More than seven hundred homeless veterans participated in Standdown 1991. Robert Van Keuren, the organizer of this event, is exploring the possibility of replicating the project in different communities throughout the country. The meeting is especially intriguing because it reaches a large number of homeless veterans at relatively moderate costs.

The issue of homeless veterans gained additional support on Veterans Day 1991 with the release of a report by the National Coalition for the Homeless, *Heroes Today, Homeless Tomorrow?: Homelessness among Veterans in the United States*. Using statistics from public and private sources to support its claims, the report declared the issue to be a national problem. Backed by data from the three federal programs that specifically target homeless veterans, the Homeless Chronically Mentally Ill program, the Domiciliary Care for the Homeless Veteran, and the Homeless Veterans Reintegration Project, the report also gave us the first national demographic profile of the homeless veteran population. A few interesting facts surfaced. First, a large percentage of homeless veterans are better educated than the general homeless population (over 80 percent graduated from high school, with one-third having either attended or graduated from college).<sup>10</sup> Second, the majority have been homeless for less than one year.<sup>11</sup> In addition, veterans who served during the Vietnam era (1964–1975) make up approximately 40 to 60 percent of the population.<sup>12</sup> Although the Veterans Workshop maintains data only on the veterans' era of service (as of December 23, 1991, Vietnam veterans made up close to 51 percent of those the shelter has served), it has been our experience that these findings are consistent with the veterans who come to the shelter. Finally, the report criticized the federal government's response to the problem of homeless veterans as "shamefully inadequate."<sup>13</sup> This report proves that the problem is one of national proportion, requiring an adequate and responsible response from federal authorities.



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### **Veteran Helping Veteran: A Powerful Philosophy**

Although the workshop believes that increased federal funding is needed to serve the entire homeless veteran population adequately, it doesn't see government aid as the panacea to the national problem of homeless veterans. Instead, the real strength lies within the veteran community itself and the natural bond of brotherhood is present in this community. The simple concept of "veteran helping veteran," on which our shelter is based, really does work. The shelter has received tremendous support from veterans organizations throughout Massachusetts. From the Veterans of Foreign Wars to the Disabled American Veterans and from the American Legion to the AMVETS, each organization has done its part in aiding brother veterans in need. With the homeless veteran emerging as a national issue, we hope that the national offices of these major veterans organizations will adopt this issue as one of their own. Should these national support groups stand solidly behind the issue and the direct service providers who serve the homeless veteran, their volunteer efforts would do more to aid the cause than any increase in federal funding. The veterans organizations have responded to the homeless veterans' calls for assistance at the local level throughout Massachusetts and in other parts of the country. All that is needed is leadership at the national level to adopt, actively lobby, and support the issue of the homeless veteran.

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### **The Vietnam Veterans Workshop**

The veteran helping veteran philosophy was born in a combat support group at the Brighton Veterans Outreach Center. In 1986, several Vietnam veterans began meeting to discuss issues common to them. They became aware that they were not alone, that others had similar feelings about Vietnam, about coming home, about life. They began to help themselves with the transition to life after Vietnam. In 1988, members of the combat support group left the veterans center to incorporate the Vietnam Veterans Workshop, a nonprofit, veterans support and advocacy group. After seeing the power of the veteran helping veteran theme in their group, they were eager to create a service group designed to help other veterans. On a visit to the Vietnam War Memorial in Washington, members of the group discovered veterans living in the park near "the Wall" and began to talk to them. The workshop members were horrified by the stories they heard and what they saw in our nation's capital. Returning from the trip, the workshop members were astonished to learn that one third of America's homeless are veterans. They immediately decided to commit themselves to this issue. Traveling to Boston-area shelters in search of homeless veterans, they were again amazed at the number they found. During one meeting at Pine Street Inn, a workshop member announced at dinner that he was planning to hold a discussion of benefits with any interested veterans. Expecting to attract fifty veterans at most, he spoke instead to over two hundred regarding their benefits. The size of the problem prompted the workshop to think in terms of acquiring its own facility to serve the homeless veteran.

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### **Sketches of War**

In 1988, the workshop was able to recruit Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright and local area resident David Mamet to create and direct *Sketches of War*, a one-night

theatrical event held at Boston's Colonial Theatre. The production featured an impressive cast, including such stars as Al Pacino, Michael J. Fox, and Donald Sutherland. The show featured vignettes of war and the experiences of the soldiers who fought in them throughout history. Excerpts included an act from Shakespeare, part of the David Rabe play *The Basic Training of Pavlo Hummel*, and poetry by Vietnam veterans. In addition to being a high-profile event that directed substantial media attention to homeless veterans, the production raised \$250,000. Part of the proceeds were given to Boston-area shelters in the form of grants to benefit homeless veterans. The remaining funds were used to produce and air a national public service announcement, "I Don't Know, but I Believe." Narrated by Walter Cronkite, the announcement was designed to raise national awareness of homeless veterans. The next step was to become part of the solution by acquiring a facility and starting a direct service project exclusively for homeless veterans.

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### **17 Court Street**

After several months of a complex application process, with much needed assistance from concerned friends, the Vietnam Veterans Workshop was able to acquire a ten-year lease on the former Veterans Administration Outpatient Hospital at 17 Court Street in downtown Boston. The building is leased by the General Service Administration as part of the Federal Surplus Property Program created by Title V of the McKinney Homeless Act, which provides surplus government property to nonprofit organizations serving the homeless. This 140,000-square-foot, ten-story building offers the potential to provide the variety of services that the workshop intends to offer homeless veterans. In December 1989, the workshop opened a drop-in day shelter for homeless veterans. The original program provided a range of services such as hot showers and meals, drug and alcohol counseling, and job counseling and referral services. A month later, Massachusetts provided the necessary funds to operate a hundred-bed emergency shelter. After the night program was added, the workshop named Massachusetts's first veterans shelter, the New England Shelter for Homeless Veterans. The workshop didn't want to limit itself to serving only those in the Greater Boston area, choosing instead to work aggressively toward providing outreach and services to homeless veterans in five New England states. Initially, staff from the city of Boston's Long Island Shelter operated the night program.

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### **142nd Point of Light**

On May 14, 1990, in recognition of its efforts on behalf of homeless veterans, President George Bush named the Vietnam Veterans Workshop the nation's 142nd Point of Light. This national notice provided the workshop and the shelter with positive publicity, and aided in underlining the tragedy of homeless veterans. The honor meant a great deal to the members of the workshop, strengthening their resolve to provide a model program to address the needs of homeless veterans. After a year of training with the Long Island Shelter staff, designed to ease its members into the difficult task of running a homeless shelter, the workshop took complete control of the site in December 1990, managing both the day and night programs at the New England Shelter for Homeless Veterans. With the building theirs, the workshop members had to develop a program and a philosophy more suited to veterans and the idea of veteran helping veteran.

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## **The Veterans Shelter**

### ***A Unique Approach***

The veteran helping veteran concept has flourished in the larger environment of the hundred-bed shelter. Recognizing that most homeless individuals lack any type of structure in their lives, the workshop wanted to create an environment that would build self-respect and self-confidence in homeless veterans. Using the military regimen with which all veterans are familiar, the workshop created a program that organizes the residents into four platoons and one company. Each platoon, consisting of twenty-five veterans, is led by a staff counselor "platoon leader" (a fellow veteran), who daily addresses the individual needs of the platoon. Whether the issue is substance abuse, a family problem, or an overnight pass, the platoon leader acts directly to aid the veteran. The program utilizes military terms in all spheres of the operation (for example, referring to clothing and other essentials as "supply") to emphasize the fact that this is a community or "place" designed exclusively for veterans. Along with these signs of military structure, the veterans sleep in bunks acquired from the U.S. Air Force arranged in a barracks-style setting.

To obtain and keep a locker, a veteran must agree to give sixteen hours of volunteer time per month. This program, administered by a volunteer coordinator, allows veterans to volunteer inside the shelter or out in the community in such groups as the Boston Food Bank and the Special Olympics. This policy accomplishes four specific functions. First, it drastically reduces the funds needed to operate the shelter. The departments of Housekeeping, Food Service, and Supply depend heavily on volunteer help to accomplish their work. Second, it fosters a sense of responsibility in veterans to give something back to the shelter or their community. Third, it gives the veterans a place to store personal items, fostering a greater sense of identity and self-confidence. With a locker, the veteran can build a wardrobe and hold personal items. Fourth, through volunteer work the veteran develops a sense of belonging and commitment to the shelter. It is not uncommon for veterans to contribute more than one hundred hours of time a month. Such volunteers of extraordinary amounts of time are often recognized for their service with free tickets to movies or sporting events. This type of commitment to the organization and its ideals has been a source of great strength for the shelter since its inception.

A veteran who first enters the shelter is individually oriented through the intake process, which is designed to identify the veteran, establishing who he or she is, inform him or her of the various services that the shelter offers, and welcome him or her to the shelter, making the veteran feel comfortable in the new environment. The shelter's day program provides the majority of the supportive services. The night program consists mainly of making its hundred beds available. Due to the lack of appropriate facilities, women veterans cannot participate in the night program. They are, however, encouraged to take advantage of all aspects of the daytime schedule.

At the beginning of the intake process, a staff member asks the individual to provide proof of veteran status. The shelter requires the veteran's DD 214 (military discharge record) and another form of identification. If a veteran does not possess the DD 214, the intake staff refers him or her to the Massachusetts War Records office (if the veteran entered the military in Boston) or requests the DD 214 from the National Personnel Records Center in St. Louis (if the veteran entered the military elsewhere). The workshop was instrumental in establishing a facsimile request



system with St. Louis, which gave homeless veterans priority status and drastically cut the response time. Because of this system, the workshop and other veterans organizations can provide better and more responsive service to the homeless veteran. A veteran who can furnish other proof of veteran status (for example, a VA medical card) and has filled out a request for his or her DD 214, is accepted on a temporary basis until the record is received from St. Louis. These precautions have been instituted to ensure that the shelter's services are reaching their intended clientele, homeless veterans.

The veteran is then asked to fill out an intake form, a questionnaire detailing his or her military record, employment status, housing status, and medical condition. The veteran receives a file number, and his or her intake information is entered into the computer used by the counseling staff to track the veteran's progress during his or her time in the program. This information is kept confidential, to be used only by the counseling staff on the veteran's behalf. After being assigned a number, the veteran is given a personal tour of the shelter facility by the intake staff member and is made to feel comfortable with the shelter so that he or she may take advantage of its services. Finally, the veteran is given the workshop ID card necessary to use of the shelter services. The intake process is designed to restore the person's identity. The homeless veteran is no longer a faceless member of the homeless population, but a member of the Veterans Workshop. The veteran is part of a community, part of a brotherhood (staff and clients frequently refer to one another as brothers), part of a place called the Veterans Shelter.

The workshop, wanting to establish the rehabilitation philosophy of the program, resisted the trap into which many large shelters fall — that of warehousing the homeless. It didn't want to become an "enabler" to homeless veterans. Instead, it wanted to provide as many services as possible to give veterans every opportunity to return to the mainstream. In keeping with this philosophy, the workshop adopted a policy that requires each veteran, within twenty-one days after securing a permanent bed in the night program, to find part-time employment for a minimum of twenty-four hours per week, or to enroll in an educational program, either vocational or academic. A veteran who does not satisfy this requirement must relinquish his bed to a fellow veteran and return to the waiting list. This policy requires the veteran to take positive and constructive measures to improve his life. The workshop expects much from the veteran in terms of helping himself, but the program also caters to the veteran, making it as easy as possible to work at improving the quality of his life. For example, the shelter allows all veterans to sleep in until noon on Sundays so that those who put in a lot of time at work or school can catch up on sleep before beginning another week. Veterans who comply with the twenty-one-day policy and remain productive are free to stay as long as it takes for them to reach self-sufficiency.

### *Creating a Sense of Place*

In addition to its military structure, the workshop wanted to create a strong sense of place or community in the shelter. In their outreach work at various shelters, members were struck by the impersonal, dreary nature of these programs. The environments were filled with despair, pain, fear, and hopelessness. The workshop was determined to create a unique place for veterans that emphasized positive action, brotherhood, self-help, and hope.

The initial step in creating a sense of place was to make the veteran completely comfortable with his or her environment. To achieve this goal, the workshop com-



mitted itself to four objectives. First, the shelter had to be physically safe for all who use the facility. Many homeless people have stopped frequenting some shelters because the staffs could not guarantee a safe atmosphere. To maintain a safe environment, the workshop relied on its own security force, nicknamed the Bulldogs, comprised completely of former residents. As a result, the shelter is the only one in Boston that doesn't require a city police officer to assure nightly security.

Second, the shelter maintains a drug- and alcohol-free environment. If a veteran refuses assistance from the substance-abuse counselor, arrangements are made by the staff to find him shelter elsewhere. A veteran "under the influence" is never allowed to stay at the shelter. A large percentage of the shelter's population are dealing positively with their sobriety, so it is not fair to have them exposed to an intoxicated person. A veteran who enters the facility under the influence of either drugs or alcohol is referred to the shelter's Substance Abuse Department. There, the veteran decides whether or not to receive help in the form of counseling or detoxification. The workshop wanted to create and maintain an atmosphere that rewards and encourages sobriety and discourages abuse.

Third, the shelter provides a physically clean environment. Individuals are responsible and made accountable for their personal hygiene in addition to making their beds. Under the direction of the housekeeping staff, the facility is cleaned twice daily by the veterans. Fourth, brotherhood among fellow veterans is fostered and encouraged by the shelter staff. The vast majority of the staff are veterans, and approximately 75 percent of them are formerly homeless veterans. As veterans, the staff sincerely believe in the program and the veteran helping veteran concept and support and practice it in their work. Moreover, the staff participate in weekly meetings designed to create and build a team within the staff and improve the overall effectiveness of the service they provide.

In addition to creating a comfortable environment, the workshop built a sense of place by establishing innovative activities uncharacteristic of a homeless shelter. On Monday evenings, the entire shelter community meet for a unique event called Town Meeting, used primarily as an open forum for all veterans of the shelter. Staff make announcements as needed, policy changes are announced, disputes between veterans are raised and settled, guest speakers are invited to talk about issues concerning veterans, for example, AIDS, education, and employment opportunities. Moderated by the executive director, Town Meeting gives every veteran the opportunity to voice his opinion or make a suggestion concerning the program.

Through the positive use of athletics, the shelter has fostered unity and camaraderie by maintaining active basketball and softball teams. Composed of staff and residents, these teams play and challenge teams from local Veterans Administration hospitals and other community groups. Attracting young veterans, these teams give many the physical outlet necessary to maintain a positive outlook on life. The teams also provide a perfect opportunity for staff and residents to interact and enjoy one another's company in a nonshelter environment.

Finally, the shelter maintains an honor guard, which represents both the shelter and the workshop. During the last year, the honor guard proudly marched in several parades in the Greater Boston area. The highlight of the season came when they received a trophy for their performance in the Dorchester Day parade. Also composed of staff and residents, the honor guard provides a unique opportunity for the veterans to march while representing the shelter with pride and dignity. Throughout

the parade season, the shelter's honor guard consistently received a gracious and warm reception from the crowds, which acted as positive therapy to many of them toward continuing on their road to recovery. These three unique and innovative activities contribute positively to the sense of place.

After creating the community, the workshop began to ask, What should this place do? What services should this place offer? The workshop came up with three functions. First and foremost, the shelter must be a place that serves veterans. Second, it must be a place that rehabilitates veterans. Third, it must be a place that heals veterans.

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### **A Place That Serves Veterans**

The workshop's initial concern was to provide the basic services of a bed, a meal, clothing, and a hot shower. After that was accomplished, the workshop looked for different ways in which the shelter could better serve veterans. In addition to providing breakfast, lunch, and dinner daily to over one hundred veterans, Food Service provides two services that are unique to the shelter and contribute to the feeling of place. A steak dinner is served to all new residents on their first Saturday night in the shelter. This contributes to the sense that he belongs in this place. Food Service also cooks to order a hot breakfast for the veterans every Sunday morning. This, along with being able to sleep late that day, contributes to making Sunday a true day of rest. Food Service also operates a coffee counter, appropriately named the Dry Dock. When supplies are available, coffee and doughnuts are served to the veteran. The Dry Dock also acts as a popular place to congregate and socialize with fellow veterans during the day or evening.

The shelter's supply operation provides clothing and toiletries to the veteran population. The department sorts, cleans, and labels all in-kind donations. Clothing is displayed by item and size. Their selections from Supply are recorded and monitored to discourage the veterans from abusing the privilege of the system. Supply can provide veterans who are leaving the shelter for other housing necessities like dishes, furniture, and appliances. Although Supply holds an unglamorous position in the shelter, its role is essential to make available to our veterans the goods they need to continue on the road to recovery.

The shelter's medical program offers essential services to the veterans. First, the medical staff oversees and monitors the taking of all medication by shelter residents. A member of the medical staff is on duty during the shelter's second shift (4:00 P.M. to 12 A.M.) nightly. The medical staff also monitors the physical condition of the shelter population, identifying veterans in poor health they should watch individually. The staff maintains medical records on each veteran and is responsible for educating the veterans about certain health issues. In the past, guest speakers have addressed shelter residents on the issues of AIDS, tuberculosis, and high blood pressure. The medical program has sponsored TB testing, flu shots, and blood pressure screening for the population.

The workshop has created two exciting cooperatives that have improved the medical care of veterans at the shelter. Volunteer physicians and nurses from the Harvard Community Health Plan come in once a week to treat the veterans. Most of them have no health insurance and many do not qualify for medical benefits through the VA, so this weekly visit by a physician provides a much needed service. The New England School of Optometry operates an eye clinic in the shelter, in a partnership that provides exams,

glasses, and follow-up visits to the veterans at no charge. The students are able to practice and gain valuable experience in their chosen profession on a large diverse population. The veterans are provided with eye care that in some cases can change their outlook on life both physically in terms of better vision and psychologically in increased self-confidence. All parties benefit in some way from these cooperatives.

Besides the necessities of Food Service, Supply, and the medical program, the workshop has pioneered services that make life more comfortable for the veterans while they concentrate on getting back on their feet. A laundry facility allows veterans to keep their clothing clean at no expense. In another successful venture, students of the Bojack Hair School come in bimonthly to cut the veterans' hair in the shelter's own barber shop. The service is free, and a haircut gives the veterans pride in their appearance and new hope for the future. A mail facility was constructed to give each resident his own post office box. This system allows the veteran to reestablish a mailing address and provides him with a sense of identity. The shelter's van and bus provide transportation for veterans with educational and medical appointments. The shelter works at providing entertainment to the veteran, offering television and movies nightly and arranging for comedians and musical acts to come by periodically to entertain. Supplementing its softball and basketball teams, the shelter plans to emphasize physical fitness among the veterans more in the future. While in the past, the veterans have utilized facilities at the Cambridge YMCA free of charge, the shelter is currently designing an in-house training facility that will allow veterans to lift weights, ride a stationary bike, and run on a treadmill. These are ancillary but necessary to provide comprehensive services to homeless veterans.

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### **A Place That Rehabilitates Veterans**

To give veterans every opportunity to begin a process of rehabilitation, the workshop has designed a place that offers a wide range of programs and services through the following departments: Counseling Services, Substance Abuse, Job Training/Job Placement, and Housing. Each department contributes a different service for the rehabilitative process.

The Counseling Services office deals with a number of issues. The staff is responsible for administering the legal aid program that provides free legal counsel to veterans. The lawyers are all veterans who volunteer their time and services to the shelter. Many veterans have resolved a legal issue before taking any rehabilitative steps. This program allows them that opportunity on a pro bono basis. Second, the staff provides veterans benefits counseling, dealing with benefits on the local (city of Boston), state (Massachusetts), and federal (Department of Veterans Affairs) levels. The counselors, who are knowledgeable about the VA system, inform and guide the veterans through the governmental process. Veterans benefits are crucial to many, who may be eligible for financial assistance to enable them to recover from personal debt or gain self-confidence. The staff of counselors individually ensure that the veterans are receiving their rightful due. VA representatives periodically come to the shelter to answer questions regarding VA benefits or claims.

Third, the Counseling staff are responsible for referring veterans interested in educational opportunities. The shelter is privileged to be able to utilize the outstanding educational program of the University of Massachusetts at Boston's Veterans Upward Bound Program, which is specifically designed for veterans preparing to



enter college. Geared toward individuals who have been away from education for a period of time, this program couldn't present a better fit for the types of veterans who are interested in education. In 1991, seventeen veterans from the shelter graduated from the Upward Bound Program. A little more than one percent of the 1,643 veteran population served by the shelter have graduated from the preparatory program. Of the seventeen graduates, eight are pursuing an undergraduate degree at UMass/Boston. The shelter does everything in its power to encourage and assist veterans whose goal is an education. A study hall where veterans can do their homework is available. Students have access to computers on a priority basis. During semesters, the shelter runs a shuttle to UMass each night to make the commute manageable for the veterans.

Fourth, the Counseling staff provides individual and group counseling on marriage and family problems, stress reduction classes, and posttraumatic stress disorder. The most important aspect of their work, individual counseling, brings veterans home to meet and deal with difficult issues. From this point, the veterans can face their problems head-on and begin the rehabilitative process.

According to the National Coalition for the Homeless report, approximately half of homeless veterans have a substance-abuse problem. The report goes on to state that homeless veterans tend to abuse alcohol more than illegal drugs.<sup>14</sup> Other studies show that only one third of the entire homeless population are substance abusers.<sup>15</sup> Why do homeless veterans have such a high incidence of substance abuse? There are no clear or obvious answers. The Substance Abuse office deals solely with the issue of drug and alcohol abuse in the shelter population. Each veteran who is recognized as having a substance-abuse problem must sign a contract that outlines a recovery plan which includes participation in a specified number of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) or Narcotics Anonymous (NA) meetings or individual counseling sessions per week. The veteran must follow this program in order to remain a resident of the shelter.

The tracking and monitoring of each contracted veteran is one of the main duties of the Substance Abuse staff, who also organize and run nightly AA and periodic NA meetings. The staff administer a highly structured, regimented substance-abuse program, which is necessary to rehabilitate veterans with a long history of substance abuse. Finally, the Substance Abuse staff handle detoxification and long-term recovery program referrals for the veterans of the shelter. The staff's main priority is to provide veterans with the best medical care possible, depending on their insurance coverage and financial situation. After a veteran is accepted to a detox, the staff monitor his or her progress and make arrangements for the person's return to the shelter after completion of the program. The staff realize that relapse is part of recovery for a substance abuser. They retain loyalty and faith in all veterans, reintroducing them to the same structured program from which they initially broke. Because drug addiction is a disease, effective treatment must be structured, intensive, and individually designed for each patient. The shelter's substance-abuse program works with the individuals to deal positively and comprehensively with their addictions in order to rehabilitate the veterans and create the structural foundation necessary to a sober life.

After the veterans have resolved their personal problems through the Counseling and Substance Abuse offices, they are referred to the internal Job Training/Job Placement Department. In May 1991, the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL) funded a \$145,000 program to create an in-house employment training and placement pro-

gram designed specifically to target homeless veterans. As part of the job-training program, the shelter has hired several homeless veterans as live-in staff in transitional positions. Not meant to provide permanent employment, these positions are designed to act as a stepping-stone to life after the shelter. These veterans receive room and board and a salary. They are trained and employed as apprentices in housekeeping, engineering, or security.

The security force is made up entirely of formerly homeless veterans. They take classes in proper security procedure, radio procedure, first aid, and self-defense. The classes are taught by another formerly homeless veteran who graduated from the Foxboro Police Academy to prepare to manage this part of the job-training program. After completing the program and accumulating a specified number of hours on security, the veterans receive a certificate of training and are qualified to act as security guard in a number of industries. Our job-placement coordinator works to secure employment for them with local Boston companies. Throughout the training, the veterans are not just provided a skill, they are given a sense of accomplishment and achievement by successfully completing the course. This self-confidence will benefit them in today's competitive job market.

The second aspect of the job-training program is the creation of a computer training lab aptly named the Computer Factory, which contains five IBM-compatible computers and two printers. The program is divided into two projects with different objectives. First, basic computer literacy classes, taught by volunteers from the business community, are designed for veterans who want to learn a little about computers and overcome their initial fear of them. Basic courses are provided in Introduction to the PC, Word-Perfect 5.1, Lotus 1-2-3, and dBase IV. The classes meet twice a week for a total of approximately six hours. After finishing one of these courses, a veteran is aware of what the software package is capable of doing and knows how to perform basic tasks and operations. The courses are not designed to develop computer proficiency, but to aid veterans who want to use a computer occasionally to type a letter or résumé. More than thirty veterans are enrolled in these classes at the shelter.

The second project is the development of a computer training program to make veterans proficient in the computer industry. Standard software for word processing, spreadsheets, and databases gives them the ability to type a minimum of fifty words per minute, and prepare them for the business environment through seminars conducted by local business executives. This project is designed for veterans who express an interest in developing computer skills necessary to the business environment. It will be considered a school program by the shelter and require a commitment to complete the curriculum adequately. Prior to entering the program veterans will have to sign an educational contract with the program director to demonstrate their commitment. A volunteer committee of computer professionals and educators, recruited with the assistance of the Boston Computer Society's Non-Profit Assistance Program, was formed to advise the program director in creating a detailed lesson plan and curriculum for the course. This program will resemble a vocational technical school curriculum in structure and content. The course will meet five times a week, five hours a day, for approximately three months. It will be divided into three sections, each with competencies that the veterans must pass before proceeding to the next level. At the successful conclusion of this intensive course, veterans will receive a certificate of completion. The job-placement specialist will create cooperatives with area temporary agencies. The veterans will start in this type of

position, gaining experience and getting comfortable in the business environment, with the prospect of its leading to full-time employment for many.

The job-training program will work to create additional entrepreneurial enterprises under DOL funding grants. Possible ideas include a cleaning company, a laundry company, an expansion of the security force to include outside contracts, and a temporary manpower service. Another venture comes from the Computer Factory, which is planning to develop an entrepreneurial business designed to employ and train veterans in data entry work. This program would in effect establish a data entry enterprise that would contract out work from companies in the Greater Boston area.

Since the shelter is a nonprofit institution, the program would be able to return most of the contract price to the veterans and thus undercut bids of competing companies. The only expenses of this program would be the costs of computer equipment needed to upgrade an old minicomputer and the salary of an administrator. It would accomplish two important objectives — training veterans in data entry skills and providing them with a source of income necessary to continuing the rehabilitative process. Along with temporary work opportunities, this program would give graduates of the computer training program an opportunity to gain important work experience. These additional programs will add to the variety of rehabilitation options in the job-training program.

The job-placement program provides counseling and placement services to the veterans of the shelter. The job-placement specialist assists veterans with such job-search tools as a résumé, an interview, and networking. The specialist also works to provide the skills needed to face today's job marketplace successfully. Utilizing the Veterans Unit at the Massachusetts Department of Employment and Training, he refers many veterans for additional counseling and job seminars to supplement the services that it provides at the shelter. For a number of reasons, many veterans have been away from the work force for quite some time. Understanding the veterans, the specialist recognizes that looking for a job is an emotionally trying process for many of them. Therefore, he takes a great deal of time to provide individual counseling to build veterans' self-confidence. The job-placement program also works at developing outside job opportunities with area businesses. The shelter is involved in a cooperative with a transportation company that delivers cars to various destinations. As of this writing, the company has employed more than twenty veterans. Establishing such successful cooperatives will continue to be the main priority of the job-placement program. The job-training and -placement programs work together to provide basic and innovative job services to give the veterans every opportunity to secure employment that allows them to continue the rehabilitation process.

The final step in this process brings the veterans to the Housing Department. Once veterans secure the means to remain self-sufficient, they are referred to the Housing Department. Here they are given assistance in finding suitable housing to satisfy their needs as to location and cost. Despite the lack of affordable housing in the Greater Boston area, the Housing Department works with such agencies as the area's housing authorities and the VA Housing Department to provide the veterans with affordable and acceptable housing options. The Housing Department has a variety of housing available. In addition to conventional apartments, there are also sober houses (rooming houses that ensure an alcohol- and drug-free environment), subsidized housing for the elderly (available to the veterans who are senior citizens), and single-room-occupancy units (SROs). In October 1990, the Department of Housing and Urban Development awarded the workshop a \$3.5 million subsidy to build



fifty-nine SRO units in its 17 Court Street facility. Delays in the acquisition of proper financing delayed the project for over a year. However, the workshop recently acquired the needed funds to initiate construction on these SRO units, which are to be occupied by veterans of the shelter, in early 1992. As a result, the Housing Department will have a new option to offer veterans. Housing is usually the final stage in the rehabilitation process, leading veterans out of the shelter into a place they can comfortably call their own.

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### **A "Place" to Heal Veterans**

The workshop has created a program specifically designed to address the needs of homeless veterans suffering from posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), the vast majority of whom are Vietnam veterans. Although this group is a relatively small proportion of the homeless veteran population, the workshop believes there must be a special commitment to them because of the poor treatment they received on their return from Vietnam. The emphasis on this program is to establish an environment conducive for the veterans to confront and then heal from their war experiences. To provide them with this opportunity, a combat support group meets weekly to address issues common to those who have experienced combat.

Last June the workshop sponsored a trip to Washington, D.C., for a group of homeless Vietnam veterans accompanied by counselors from the shelter. Its goal was to create an atmosphere conducive to healing old wounds. Through a carefully planned itinerary, which included touring the Capitol and the White House, laying a memorial wreath at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, and participating in individual and group counseling sessions, a camaraderie of spirit was achieved that prepared the group for the pain of going to the Vietnam War Memorial, the capstone of the trip. The visit to the Wall was a difficult but restorative experience for many of the veterans as issues that had been hidden for years surfaced. With the aid of counselors, they confronted their wartime experiences. For many, this weekend was the beginning of a long healing process, which they are still going through to reconcile themselves to their combat experiences. Coupled with follow-up counseling and referrals to the VA and its PTSD program, this trip aided many in getting their lives pointed in a positive direction.

The workshop is planning a companion outing to the Washington trip. It will be an outward-bound-style event, with a group of Vietnam veterans spending a period of time in the wilderness. It will attempt to create an environment similar to that of Vietnam — all camping equipment to be borrowed from the military — in order to draw out the veterans' repressed feelings about the war. With counselors guiding the veterans through the events, the trip would become another valuable tool with which to heal old wounds and to set them on the track to recovery.

The workshop is also planning to develop a history seminar concerning the United States' involvement in Southeast Asia for veterans who still possess only a vague understanding of their service in Vietnam. This class will be designed to answer Vietnam veterans' most common questions concerning the country's history. History departments of local colleges will be approached to participate by volunteering instructors or donating needed materials.

Along with the PTSD program, the workshop provides assistance to Vietnam veterans who were exposed to the defoliant Agent Orange. Through the Agent Orange

Class Assistance Program (AOCAP) specifically designed to assist the families of the veterans, the workshop provides a variety of the supportive services, including counseling to deal effectively with the effects of Agent Orange on the family and assistance in applying for disability claims. The majority of the program involves outreach in the homeless veteran community to identify those who were exposed to Agent Orange. After initial contact is made with a homeless veteran, the process of contacting the family is difficult and often lengthy because many homeless veterans are estranged from their families. With the development of the New England Consortium, which consists of service providers throughout New England who are directly involved in this issue, a strategy has been developed to effectively advertise the AOCAP program by informing families of its services. The objective of the workshop is to serve as many families as possible, trying to aid in healing the pain and trauma of the families' indirect exposure to Agent Orange.

In November 1991, the workshop invited the Vietnamese Veterans of Boston to tour the shelter, speak to the veterans at Monday night's Town Meeting, and serve them Thanksgiving dinner. Although this group was composed of veterans of the republic of Vietnam's military — troops commonly referred to as ARVN by American troops — it did not represent the enemy, but many Vietnam veterans had bad memories of the performance and loyalty of ARVN. The workshop felt that it would be good for both sides to meet and resolve some of the issues from the war. Many at the Town Meeting stated that "it was a time to heal." After a few concerns were addressed and the veterans sensed the sincerity of the Vietnamese in coming to the shelter, they welcomed them warmly and with the sense of brotherhood the veterans of the shelter have for one another. By serving Thanksgiving dinner to the veterans of the shelter, the Vietnamese veterans gave a little bit back to the some of the men who fought to keep their country free. Through its various programs, the workshop is committed to addressing constructively the many issues of the Vietnam War in an attempt to heal the wounds of the Vietnam veterans so that they can take their rightful place in mainstream society. As the shelter's executive director frequently exclaims, "All they wanted to do was come home, and it's time they did."<sup>16</sup>

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### **The Future**

On November 11, 1991, the federal government awarded the workshop \$4.2 million, funds desperately needed to renovate the facility at 17 Court Street. This money will allow the workshop to repair the entire building, and expand its programs. The workshop plans to create such programs as its own detox unit and medical clinic to better serve homeless veterans. Despite the wide variety of services and programs created by the workshop to assist homeless veterans, one must not lose sight that the workshop is fighting a war on homelessness on the streets of Boston that it is losing. Since the shelter opened, nine of its former residents have died on the streets of Boston. Each Memorial Day the shelter holds a private in-house ceremony to honor them. In October 1991, Ken Norton, a Vietnam veteran, died of a massive heart attack on the floor of the shelter. His tragic death was news throughout the Boston area, but the death of his eight fellow veterans passed without an eyebrow being raised, without a tear being shed. One death of a homeless veteran on the streets of the country that he once defended is completely unacceptable, but nine of them is an outrage. The workshop is committed to ending the horrible tragedy of America's

homeless veterans. Waging the battle, the workshop has established a comprehensive program specifically designed to aid in the reintegration of all homeless veterans to their rightful place in the society they once helped to defend. ❧

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## Notes

1. Oliver Stone, *Platoon* (Los Angeles: Hemdale Film Corporation, 1986.)
2. *The 1990 Annual Report of the Interagency Council on the Homeless* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1990), 248.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid., 39.
5. Joan Alker, *Heroes Today, Homeless Tomorrow?: Homelessness among Veterans in the United States* (Washington D.C.: National Coalition for the Homeless, 1991), 8.
6. "Sheltering Homeless Veterans," *Boston Globe*, March 23, 1990.
7. James Goodwin, "Readjustment Problems Among Vietnam Veterans," condensed from *The Etiology of Combat-Related Post Traumatic Stress Disorder*, in *Post Traumatic Stress Disorders: A Handbook for Clinicians*, edited by Dr. Thomas Williams (Cincinnati, Ohio: Disabled American Veterans pamphlet, 1989), 13-18.
8. Alker, *Heroes Today*, 21.
9. Jason DeParle, "Aid for Homeless Focuses on Veterans," *New York Times*, November 11, 1991, A-8.
10. Alker, *Heroes Today*, 1.
11. Ibid., 12.
12. Ibid., 13.
13. Ibid., 23.
14. Ibid., 22.
15. DeParle, "Aid for Homeless," A-8.
16. "Sheltering Homeless Veterans."