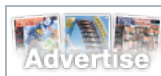


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VETERANS

Veterans Matter aids locals who served

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Toledoan Ken Leslie is a funny man — a funny man on a mission. As a former standup comedian, he knows how to brighten a conversation. As a former homeless person, he knows desperation.

Last year, Leslie, the founder of 1Matters and Tent City, launched Veterans Matter. The nonprofit organization helps house homeless veterans and their families by raising money for the rental deposits required by the Department of Housing and Urban Development and the Department of Veterans Affairs Supportive Housing program (HUD-VASH). The program provides veterans with vouchers for free housing, but requires a rent deposit up front.

“These are people who generally don’t have jobs or income, and so they can’t produce the required deposits,” Leslie said. “They’ve been forced to beg from churches, VFWs and the like.”

Leslie said the first year’s effort, which basically served as a pilot program, has generated some tangible results.

“It’s pretty incredible. To date, we have housed 136 individuals and 90 veteran families in 22 cities in three states. We have raised more than \$100,000, half of which was raised by ZZ Top at the Houston chapter.”



Ken Leslie, founder of Veterans Matter. Toledo Free Press File Photo by Joseph Herr.

Veterans Matter gained momentum with the help of ZZ Top bassist Dusty Hill, who was inspired by Leslie’s efforts and opened up a chapter in Houston. Since then, John Mellencamp has joined the effort and the program is finding that other organizations and artists with similar goals are willing to partner up for strength in numbers.

One of those organizations is the American Music Project: Voices for Veterans, which is a collaboration of musicians and music industry executives brought together to raise funds and awareness for housing homeless veterans.

John McGah is a senior associate with the National Center on Family Homelessness, and is involved with Voices for Veterans.

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McGah said Voices for Veterans is part of the Give US Your Poor initiative, which in 2007 released a benefit CD featuring talented homeless musicians with artists such as Bruce Springsteen, Jon Bon Jovi, Bonnie Raitt, Natalie Merchant, Pete Seeger, Jewel, Keb' Mo', Michelle Shocked, Buffalo Tom and actors Danny Glover and Tim Robbins.

"The CD showed homeless people not merely defined by their housing need," McGah said. "It showed people with amazing creative talents, and the power to connect with others through music regardless of housing status. Homelessness is about disconnection; music is about connection."

McGah added that collaborative efforts are essential in fighting homelessness, and that Veterans Matter's focus on one key aspect of housing made an easy choice as a beneficiary of the Voices for Veterans campaign.

"Ending veteran homelessness is a daunting task," he said. "It's big. But the bipartisan political support and public support exists. And the numbers of veterans experiencing homelessness is something we can wrap our arms around — fewer than 63,000 at last count by HUD. When looking for the most strategic partners to truly move the needle in ending veteran homelessness, Veterans Matter really stuck out."

Leslie echoed McGah's assertion that Veterans Matter is especially effective in providing housing for veterans.

When asked how veterans are able to sustain housing after the deposits are met, he explained that housing vouchers and assistance from the VA ensure that long-term housing and pathways to autonomy are provided.

Shawn Dowling, a social worker with the VA Ann Arbor Healthcare System, said the VA Healthcare for Homeless Veterans, HUD-VASH and HUD's Section 8 Program collaborate to transition chronically homeless veterans to supported housing through the use of tenet-based vouchers distributed through the Lucas Metropolitan Housing Authority.

In an email to Toledo Free Press, Dowling wrote that the transition to supported housing is a seamless process, supported by a wide-reaching network of partnerships. She also stressed the need for awareness.

"The public can assist by spreading the word and encouraging all homeless and at risk of homelessness veterans to contact the National Call Center for Homeless Veterans," she wrote. "Calling into the hotline will allow our homeless program staff to engage the veteran in VA and community services to assist with their transition."

Leslie praised the legislation that has made the HUD vouchers possible, as well as additional help Veterans Matter has received from all levels of government and other similar nonprofits.

"This is probably the most effective program the government has ever created to house veterans who are on the streets, and it's my hope that Congress will continue to fund the vouchers until every single veteran is off the streets," Leslie said.

After the success of the pilot program, Leslie and others are working to bring additional Veterans Matter chapters to other cities across the country, including Seattle. New England's chapter recently opened.

The secret to his success is simplicity, Leslie explained, and that focus and precision on a manageable task is what fuels Veterans Matter's momentum.

"This program is one of the few places to which people can donate that has a 100 percent success rate. Their money actually helps people get housed every single time. This is so perfect and simple. The housing is sustainable. All we need to do is help push them over the threshold."

For more information, visit veteransmatter.org.

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