

SAFE HAVEN

Dave Hammond ended up homeless in Toledo, Ohio, in 2012, seven years after his medical discharge from the Army. He moved into an apartment last fall with the help of Veterans Matter.

MARTIN KUZ/Stars and Stripes



GIVING THE GIFT OF INSTANT COMPASSION

Ohio-based nonprofit helps veterans reclaim their lives by covering rent deposits

By MARTIN KUZ ■ *Stars and Stripes*

A whiteboard that hangs on the refrigerator in Dave Hammond's apartment lists his itinerary to search for a life gone missing.

In green marker and neat, coiled script, he has written 10 priorities for recovering what he lost in the years after his medical discharge from the Army in 2005. He longs to reunite with his young son, who lives with his ex-wife in Washington. He wants to find a job, return to school, buy a computer. He needs a driver's license.

In time, Hammond hopes to rewind the spiral that by 2012 had left him homeless, surviving on the dollar menu at McDonald's and sleeping at bus stops.

He faces a long journey back from a decade of misfortune and mistakes, and there are days when his mood turns as leaden as Ohio's winter sky.

Still, looking out at the snowy tableau of downtown Toledo from the warmth of his 12th-floor apartment, he had reason for gratitude. He could ponder ambitions beyond the desire to be inside.

"It was cold out there," said Hammond, 34, who grew up in nearby Perysburg and served six years in the Army before a degenerative back condition cut short his career. "When you don't have a place to stay, that's pretty much all you think about."

He moved into his one-bedroom unit in October with the help of Veterans Matter, a nonprofit established in Toledo in 2012. The group provides rent deposits for homeless veterans who qualify for federal housing vouchers

through a program run by the departments of Veterans Affairs and Housing and Urban Development.

The joint effort by the VA and HUD has boosted President Barack Obama's five-year campaign to end homelessness among veterans. The push began

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in 2010, when more than 76,000 former service-members lacked permanent housing. The VA reported last year that the number had dropped below 50,000. (The agency will release the results of its 2015 survey of homeless veterans, conducted earlier this week, in the coming months.)

Yet the relative success of the voucher program obscures a pitfall that thwarts more veterans from escaping the purgatory of shelters and the streets.

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Can homelessness ever be conquered?

By JENNIFER HLAD
Stars and Stripes

New Orleans announced in early January that it was the first major city in the country to meet a goal issued by the Obama administration in 2010: ending veteran homelessness.

But despite dedicated efforts across the country to meet the goal by the end of 2015, and a renewed push last year after Michelle Obama's announcement of the Mayors Challenge to End Veteran Homelessness, there has been no standard or official definition of what "eliminating veteran homelessness" really means.

For Zero: 2016, a national campaign to end chronic and veteran homelessness by the end of 2016, "zero" means that at any point in time, the number of people experiencing homelessness won't be greater than the community's ability to place them in permanent housing.

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“When you don't have a place to stay, that's pretty much all you think about.”

— Dave Hammond

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The vouchers do not cover rent deposits that landlords require as a condition of leasing. A veteran can apply for the money through an array of other programs, but approval routinely takes 30 to 60 days, and sometimes stretches to four months or longer. By then, in a typical scenario, a landlord has rented to another tenant, or the veteran has drifted out of the VA's orbit.

Veterans Matter seeks to reduce the wait from months to minutes. The organization has created a cloud-based platform for VA social workers and case managers to submit online requests for rent deposits.

If the application conforms to VA and HUD guidelines, a Veterans Matter staffer accepts the request and mails a check that day to the landlord, who also receives a confirmation email. Most property managers treat the electronic notice as proof of payment and allow the veteran to move into housing without further delay.

The accelerated process delivers "instant compassion," in the words of Ken Leslie, the group's founder, whose advocacy for the homeless in Toledo traces to his own time on the streets a quarter-century ago. "The philosophy is simple," he said. "Get veterans housed to save their lives."

In three years, the group has raised \$320,000 to cover deposits for more than 500 veterans in six states. The housing has benefited almost 800 dependents, including 200 children.

Leslie, backed by one part-time employee and two contractors, plans to assist an additional 1,500 homeless veterans this year while expanding into more states, and he envisions offering aid nationwide by 2017. A former standup comedian with ties to the entertainment industry, he has drawn fundraising support from the likes of Katy Perry, Kid Rock, John Mellencamp and Dusty Hill of ZZ Top through public service announcements and concert ticket auctions.

The high-profile names contrast with the group's unseen impact. Hammond knew nothing of Veterans Matter before it paid his \$475 deposit last fall. At the time, he was nearing the two-year limit for residency at a transitional housing complex for homeless veterans. He felt a gathering dread.

"I couldn't have come up with the money," he said. "I was worried I was going to be back on the streets."

'Black-ops speed'

Leslie's concept for Veterans Matter bloomed three years ago in the chilled air of February. Every month or two, he and members of IMatters, the homeless advocacy group he formed in 2007, set out to visit different areas in the border region of northwestern Ohio and southeastern Michigan. They enter a parallel realm — a place of woodlands and train tracks, underpasses and vacant buildings — to look for those he dubs "the unhoused."

Joining the search party was his friend Shawn Dowling, a social worker with the VA's Ann Arbor Healthcare System in Michigan, a network that encompasses Toledo. She mentioned that her office had recently received 35 housing vouchers. But unable to afford security deposits, the veterans who qualified for the program remained in limbo.

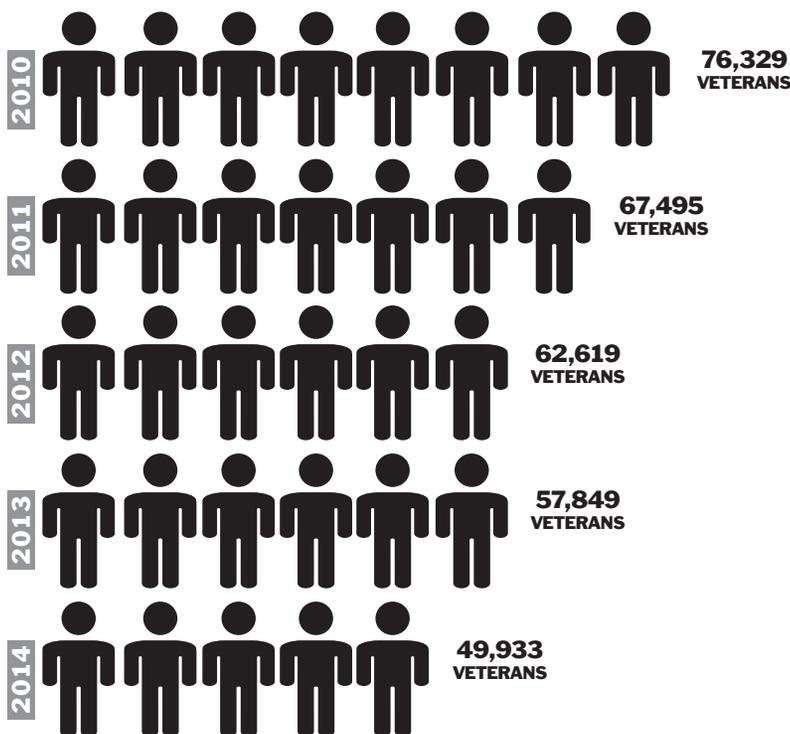
Leslie asked how the VA attempted to come up with the deposits. "We take them around to VFWs and churches and help them beg," Dowling said.

Her answer at once pained and prodded Leslie, who had found himself among the unhoused in the late 1980s.

During his touring days as a comedian, he had fallen for the dark charms of drugs and alcohol, an expensive romance that he preferred to paying rent. Sobriety arrived in 1990 after he realized how much he hated sleeping in his car. The same year, Leslie launched Tent City, an annual event that provides free job,

HOMELESS VETERANS ON THE DECLINE

The population of homeless veterans across the country has declined by more than 26,000, or 33 percent, since President Barack Obama launched a five-year campaign to end homelessness among veterans in 2010. To meet the goal, almost twice as many homeless veterans will need to be placed in permanent housing in 2015 as have been placed in the last four years.



SOURCES: Department of Veterans Affairs, Department of Housing and Urban Development

housing and medical services to the homeless, and he has devoted much of the past 25 years to their plight.

When Dowling explained that a modest \$750 separated each veteran from permanent housing, he saw a chance to bring them across the threshold.

The next morning he called Barbara Petee with ProMedica, a nonprofit health care network based in Toledo. She manages the group's advocacy fund, distributing grants for regional projects that improve the health and well-being of low-income adults and children.

Leslie laid out the dilemma of the 35 veterans and requested \$26,250 to cover their deposits. He added that he wanted to acquire the funding "at black-ops speed."

Petee needed little persuading. "Just because something like veterans' homelessness is a difficult problem doesn't mean we have to try to find difficult solutions," she said. "It was clear Ken's idea could help these veterans right away."

Seven days later — "Valentine's Day, 5:36

p.m.," to Leslie's memory — Petee called back to tell him ProMedica would supply the grant. "Three days after that, we housed our first veteran," he said. "Eleven days from idea to execution. And it's only because it's so simple and it's focused only on the people."

A translator between worlds

The work of Veterans Matter in the ensuing years has had a dramatic effect on the VA's housing program in the area. Dowling related that, before 2012, an average of 137 days elapsed between a former servicemember applying for a voucher and signing a lease. The wait has since plunged to 32 days.

She identified Leslie's organization as the principal reason, even as funding for rent deposits has become available through other federal programs. The group, acting with a nimbleness mostly unknown to government agencies, has enabled 90 veterans in the region to move into permanent housing.

The urgency is crucial given the prevalence of addiction and mental illness among the homeless. "If you take too long to get veterans housed, you'll lose them," Dowling said. "They'll go away, and they'll stay gone until you can find them again."

Toledo has earned national notice for aiding former military members in need through the cooperation of public officials, social service agencies, nonprofit groups and private businesses. The latest evidence of progress is a \$12.5-million, 75-unit apartment complex for low-income and homeless veterans that will open this summer on the city's south side. Veterans Matter will contribute to covering the rent deposits of tenants.

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Beth Sandor, director of Zero: 2016, said her organization recognized early that it needed a clear definition of what it was working toward.

New Orleans was one of more than 70 communities selected for the program, and in its news release about reaching the goal, defined ending veteran homelessness as "ensuring every homeless veteran who can be located is placed in permanent housing or in temporary housing with an identified permanent housing placement" within 30 days.

That doesn't mean that no veteran will ever again fall into homelessness in New Orleans, said Baylee Crone, executive director of the National Coalition for Homeless Veterans. But now, there is a system in place to find permanent housing for those veterans quickly, she said.

The philosophy of "housing first" requires moving the homeless into permanent housing quickly — and frequently requires lowering barriers to entry to that housing. For example, where people may have previously been required to complete a drug or alcohol treatment plan prior to being placed in permanent housing, now they could be placed in housing and given a case manager for access to the treatment and other services at a later time.

Though the approach is "not perfect by any means," research has shown it works, Crone said.

The key for communities and outreach teams is to know every person on the streets or in a shelter, Crone and Sandor said.

"If you don't know their name and needs, you'll never know what you need to get them into permanent housing," Sandor said.

And the fact that New Orleans has hit the goal "is a game-changer," Sandor said.

"It is a proof point," she said, "an amazing example of what's possible with good leadership, with the introduction of best practices, of knowing every single person's name, of not giving up until we get there."

New Orleans' achievement also is helpful for other communities that may be looking for their own definition of zero, Crone said, as well as those looking for best practices and ways to track their progress.

The city took the number of homeless veterans from a point-in-time count last year, 193, as its starting point, and was able to house 127 of them in six months, she said. But the work is not over: Organizations there must continue to connect people with the resources they need to get back on their feet.

"Ending veteran homelessness is not a set point in time," Crone said.

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MARTIN KUZ/Stars and Stripes

Three years ago, Ken Leslie founded Veterans Matter, a nonprofit based in Toledo, Ohio, that covers the rent deposits of homeless veterans to help them move into permanent housing.

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SAFE HAVEN

The difference a home makes

By MARTIN KUZ

Stars and Stripes

COLUMBUS, Ohio — A simple rule guided Travis Goodman during the years he sought shelter in vacant houses across Ohio's capital city.

"Go in late, get out early."

Slipping into an empty home after nightfall and vanishing before daybreak reduced the risk that a neighbor would spot him and call police. If he moved only in the dark, he could sleep unnoticed in the same house for days, sometimes weeks.

But now and then alcohol and pot loosened his discipline. The cops would show up and arrest the former Marine, charging him with trespassing or drug possession or both. He might stay in a homeless shelter for a stretch before resuming his particular style of house hunting.

Goodman worked a string of construction and warehouse jobs that earned him enough to afford a place of his own. He chose instead to invest in his vices, and when money ran short, he turned to petty theft and check forgery. There were more short stints in jail as lessons went unlearned.

He spun in that cycle for more than a decade until the day in 2011 when he received a call from his sister. She had seen a report on TV about a new housing community for disabled and homeless veterans. She urged him to apply for an apartment there.

The call coincided with his growing sense that he needed to change. The old military man felt hollowed out in body and mind.

"I got tired of being tired, and I got tired of being ashamed," said Goodman, 54, who grew up in Columbus and joined the Marines in 1978 for a three-year stint. "Your conscience starts to get to you. You start seeing yourself as less than human."

In summer 2012, he received approval to move into the Commons at Livingston, a red-brick, three-story housing complex of 50 one-bedroom units run by National Church Residences. The non-profit housing provider, based in Columbus, expanded the campus last year, doubling its capacity to house 100 veterans.

A framed portrait of Goodman as an 18-year-old private stands on a table in his apartment. The young man in the uniform now appears more familiar to him in some ways than the version of himself who first arrived at the Commons.

He has been sober for more than two years. He holds a part-time maintenance job and attends classes as he pursues a GED. He started dating a woman last year and spends more time with his three siblings, who live in the city.

The purpose of his life has transcended the impulse to invade and evade, to "go in late, get out early."

"I don't know where I'd be if I hadn't ended up here. Probably back in jail or dead," he said. Large windows let in the day's pale light



PHOTOS BY MARTIN KUZ/Stars and Stripes

Travis Goodman, a former Marine, lives in a one-bedroom apartment at the Commons at Livingston, a permanent supportive housing community in Columbus, Ohio, for disabled and homeless veterans. Goodman served a three-year stint starting in 1978, and later was homeless for more than a decade.

room and bathroom, and there's a large hall for group gatherings and computer, fitness and laundry rooms. Residents sign a renewable one-year lease and are allowed to stay indefinitely, paying monthly rent equal to 30 percent of their income, or no less than \$50.

VA social workers and case managers work out of offices in the building, and every week there are regular visits by physical and occupational therapists, behavioral health providers and job and education counselors. Apart from job or education training for the unemployed, the services are made available without requiring tenants to take part, creating an ethos of autonomy that nurtures their dignity.

"What we've seen for the most part is that veterans want to get better," said Robyn Haycook, a support services coordinator with National Church Residences. "They'll generally seek the help they need once they're here. But it's important for them to feel that it's their decision, and we want them to have that independence."

The rate of homelessness among veterans nationwide remains twice that of those who have never served in the armed forces. Returning to the civilian world can

inflare feelings of isolation for veterans as they mourn the loss of their military identity. The sense of estrangement often persists even for those who cope without retreating to the streets.

Living with fellow veterans in permanent supportive housing offers a healing camaraderie, an oasis of shared experience and empathy. "For some of them, being here is the first time they've felt connected to anyone since they got out of the military," Haycook said. "They feel like they're part of something again."

The presence of others who wore the uniform has comforted Chris Eckert. The Army veteran, who mustered out in 1996 after six years, lost his warehouse logistics job in 2013. His savings had drained away by early last year, and he wound up in a homeless shelter for several months before moving into the Commons in September.

"This has been like a safe haven for me," said Eckert, 45, who struggles with seizures and the effects of a brain tumor that impairs his vision.

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"I wish the things that brought me here hadn't happened. But at the same time I feel lucky to be here because I'm around people who understand. There's just a bond you feel with another veteran that you can't get with somebody else."

A second shot

The Commons blends into a milieu of residential and commercial properties on the east side of Columbus. Five years ago, in the project's early stages, the "crazy vet" stereotype shadowed its development, with some residents and business owners nervous about housing former service-members in the area.

A similar strain of anxiety has run through other cities, and projects have been scuttled or scaled back as a result. Around the Commons, meanwhile, the divide between the civilian and military realms appears to have dissolved. Veterans from the complex participate in the neighborhood's "block watch" aimed at deterring crime and mingle with residents at community events.

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I don't know where I'd be if I hadn't ended up here. Probably back in jail or dead. I have goals now. Direction.

— Travis Goodman

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For their efforts, Leslie and Mayor D. Michael Collins, along with civic leaders from 80 cities, were invited to Washington last spring for a summit on ending homelessness among veterans hosted by first lady Michelle Obama.

On a recent morning, the two men shook hands and hugged when they met in the mayor's office on the 22nd floor of the city's government center. A gray haze shrouded vistas of downtown outside the floor-to-ceiling windows as Collins, a former Marine, discussed his guest's clarity of purpose.

"What often happens in the political arena is like a Baskin-Robbins experience. An issue comes up and it's the flavor of the day, so everybody comes together and says, 'This isn't right and we have to do something about it,'" he said.

"Then the following day there's a new issue and everybody says the same thing, and nobody pays attention to yesterday's issue. That's why it's good to have people like Ken. He doesn't let you forget."

For someone who once made a living by seeking the laughter and affirmation of strangers, Leslie, 57, demurs when praised for his advocacy. He diverts credit to Dowling and her VA colleagues, to Petee and ProMedica, to Collins and other elected officials, to the county's housing authority and Veterans Service Commission.

"I'm not that smart. Really — that's not fake humility," he said, his gray ponytail spilling down beneath a porkpie hat, a pair of red-framed sunglasses perched on the brim. He talked in the rapid cadence of a man who, in addition to managing his nonprofit endeavors, must squeeze enough minutes from the day to run a small head-hunting firm. "I'm very simple, and so when I see a problem, I look for a simple solution."

Leslie, who grew up in Perrysburg and lives in Toledo with his wife, keeps an office on the ground floor of a business center converted from an old shopping mall. He has a view of a parking lot. On the wall behind his desk hangs a photo of the late folk singer Harry Chapin, one of his three heroes together with Irish songwriter Bob Geldof and John Mellencamp.

He reverses the trio less for their music than for their humanitarian work. Like Chapin before him, Geldof has fought to end world hunger; Mellencamp cofounded Farm Aid in 1985. The annual benefit concert for family farmers inspired Leslie to launch his Tent City project five years later.

During a tour stop in Toledo in 2007, Mellencamp visited the Tent City venue to meet with homeless residents. Leslie forged a bond with him, and the singer has recorded a public service announcement to promote Veterans Matter. Similar support from Ice-T, Susan Sarandon and other entertainers has raised thousands of dollars in donations and extended the group's presence into Indiana, Massachusetts, Texas and Washington.

Leslie's emphasis on recruiting the famous to crusade for the anonymous arises from a populist sensibility. He believes that celebrities, by illuminating a hidden struggle, can motivate Americans to care about those who served and who now live on the streets.

How cities around the US are doing

Since 2010, when President Barack Obama launched a five-year national campaign to end homelessness among veterans, the number of former servicemembers living on the streets has dropped from over 76,000 to below 50,000. In early January, officials in New Orleans declared that their city was the country's first to find permanent housing for all of its homeless veterans, who numbered 227 at the start of last year. Here's a look at efforts in a handful of other U.S. cities, based on figures provided by federal, state and local agencies. — Martin Kuz

Portland, Ore.:

City officials announced in November that 139 homeless veterans had been housed since April, exceeding the goal of 100 set in the spring. Housing advocates and city officials have announced a joint initiative to move 424 homeless veterans off the streets by year's end.

Los Angeles:

The Department of Veterans Affairs just agreed to create a plan to end homelessness among veterans in the city, which has more than 4,200 former servicemembers who lack permanent housing, the largest such population in the country. The agreement, reached in a lawsuit that accused the VA of neglecting homeless veterans, also calls for the creation of permanent supportive housing on a 400-acre VA campus in West Los Angeles.

Phoenix:

From 2010 through 2013, the city housed 222 veterans classified as chronically homeless, making Phoenix the nation's first city to eliminate veterans' homelessness in that category. Among former servicemembers who lack permanent housing but are not considered chronically homeless, the city's population fell from 187 in 2011 to 48 last year.

Houston:

The city found housing for 2,800 homeless veterans from 2012 to 2014, reducing Houston's overall homeless population by almost 40 percent. Among the remaining 681 homeless veterans who were counted in a survey in January 2014, more than half were in the process of receiving housing by September.

Chicago:

Mayor Rahm Emanuel unveiled a \$5 million plan last fall to provide housing for the city's 721 homeless veterans by the end of this year. Federal agencies will cover \$4.2 million of the tab, which includes construction of two permanent supportive housing communities for 127 veterans. The remaining veterans will be placed in existing affordable housing.

New York:

The city's population of homeless veterans fell by almost two-thirds between 2011 and 2014, with 3,032 former servicemembers placed in permanent housing. Several housing projects are underway across the city as officials seek to place the remaining 1,300 homeless veterans.



MARTIN KUZ/Stars and Stripes

Ken Leslie, left, the founder of Veterans Matter, talks with Greg Johnson, an Iraq War veteran, last month in Johnson's apartment in Toledo, Ohio. Leslie's Toledo-based organization paid the \$540 rent deposit that helped Johnson move into the space in September.

"I don't think of John Mellencamp as a star. I consider him a comrade in arms," he said. He held up his hands as if clapping a basketball and moved them toward each other. "What I try to do is sort of be a translator between these two worlds and get them a little closer. Because in the end, we're all at the same level."

'A big relief'

Leslie stepped inside Greg Johnson's apartment and shook hands with the Iraq War veteran while clapping him on the shoulder. "What's up, bitch?" Leslie said. Both men laughed as Johnson replied in kind.

The Toledo native moved into the one-bedroom unit on the city's west side last fall after Veterans Matter paid the \$540 rent deposit. He had spent the summer living out of a 2001 Cadillac DeVille. His wardrobe consisted of two pairs of pants and a few T-shirts that he stashed in the trunk. He drove to a Rite Aid each morning to shave

and wash up in the bathroom.

Johnson deployed to Iraq in 2007. A year removed from high school, he belonged to an Army flag detail at Camp Liberty in Baghdad that took part in memorial ceremonies for fallen troops. The duty weighed on him as the months passed.

"Even though I wasn't going outside the wire much, seeing those bodies going home does have an effect on you," he said. "You start to think, 'Could I be next?'"

He returned to Toledo following his honorable discharge in 2009, and over the next five years his life imploded in slow motion. By last spring, he was unemployed and estranged from his wife, and the county had taken custody of his three young children after police charged him with domestic assault.

Johnson found renewed hope when he connected with Dowling and her team with the VA in August. Gaining a fixed address a month later freed him to begin rebuilding his future.

He soon picked up a part-time job at the post office and enrolled in a counseling course for domestic violence that grants him visitation with his kids. A local nonprofit donated a bed, recliner and a handful of other furnishings for his apartment, and though the space still appears more empty than occupied, the comforts surpass those of a Cadillac.

"Having this place has been a big relief," said Johnson, 27, who wore a blue T-shirt imprinted with the words "I Am... Appreciated." "I know an apartment doesn't change everything, and I know I have a long way to go. But being here makes it easier to focus on what I need to do to turn things around. When you don't have a place to live, you're just thinking about survival."

Dowling regards permanent housing as essential to guiding former servicemembers toward VA support services and, in turn, restoring their dignity. She described Veterans Matter as relentless in pursuing a mission that may mean life instead of death.

"These men and women are either going to die on the streets or we can give them a place to live and help them regain control of their lives," she said. "They served their country. I think we owe it to them to get them housed as fast as we can, and that's what Ken does."

The cause animates Leslie. Driving to a meeting after leaving Johnson's apartment, he received a call from a VA social worker in Dallas. She asked if he could cover a \$250 rent deposit for a veteran who had qualified for the voucher program. "Yup, no problem," he said. "The check will go out this afternoon." The entire exchange lasted under a minute.

A couple of hours later, sitting at his desk, Leslie slipped the check into an envelope. He looked up and smiled.

"Another veteran housed. Boom. Done."

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Michael Preston, a regional director for National Church Residences, ascribed the area's acceptance of the campus mostly to the passage of time. "I think that as we've gone along people have taken into consideration that these veterans served our country, and we need to do right by them," he said.

In the common perception of permanent supportive housing, shaped in no small part by the term itself, tenants stay for good. In practice, and contrary to the criticism that such housing amounts to "veteran welfare," the Commons staff encourages residents to reintegrate into their communities and families as their recovery evolves.

"The goal is for them to reach independence," Haycock said. "It isn't something that's forced. But we want them to eventually live in the community again without the need for the intensive services we give them here."

Blaine Ware found himself homeless after the death of his girlfriend three years ago. The former Marine, who left the service in 1983 after four years, initially resisted asking for help.

"It was hard," said Ware, 55, who grew up in Dayton, Ohio. "I'm supposed to serve others, not have others serve me." Yet his time at the Commons has enabled him to land a job at a retail clothing chain and prepare for moving out in the next year or two.

"I've been fortunate to have this opportunity to put my life back together," he said. "I'm not sure what I would have done otherwise."

For Travis Goodman, who lost so many years to alcohol and drugs and self-inflicted inertia, the Commons represents redemption. He plans to collect his GED later this year and switch to full-time work, and if he saves enough money, the man who once skulked into houses hopes to someday buy one.

"It's only by luck that I didn't die," he said. "I got a second shot. I'm not going to let it pass."

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MARTIN KUZ/Stars and Stripes

Blaine Ware, a former Marine who left the service in 1983, has lived at the Commons at Livingston in Columbus, Ohio, since 2012.