

# The New York Times

## The City Bolsters Its Effort to Shelter Homeless Veterans

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On any given night, a virtual army of 150,000 veterans are homeless across the nation, including an estimated 1,200 in New York City.

Bracing for the return of thousands of soldiers from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan in the midst of a deep recession, city officials have taken some unprecedented steps to prevent a next wave of veterans from also sleeping on its streets.

During the past year, the city has spent \$2.3 million to remodel a dingy veterans shelter in Long Island City, Queens, replacing a large room filled with cots with 243 military-style prefabricated living cubicles, and given \$14.8 million to build two apartment buildings, where residents will have access to on-site counseling within a mile of the James J. Peters V.A. Medical Center in the Bronx. It has also lobbied to transform empty annex buildings at a veterans medical center in suburban Montrose into 96 units of two-year transitional housing, the first of its kind in the state.

And, perhaps most important, the city's Department of Homeless Services and the federal [Department of Veterans Affairs](#) have integrated with Project Torch, where veterans can pursue short- and long-term housing as well as other services, all in the same office — something no other city has done, according to the Department of Veterans Affairs.

The moves are being watched closely in Washington as a possible model for other communities hoping to avoid a homeless debacle like the one that followed Vietnam, and even those who have long been critical of the federal bureaucracy's handling of homeless veterans are cautiously optimistic. Rosanne Haggerty, whose group, Common Ground, pioneered the model of supportive housing — in which counseling and other services are provided to enable residents to function independently — and is running the Montrose project, said, "There is a lot to suggest that what New York is doing is really setting the standard."

Ms. Haggerty added, "We don't know if the perfect system has been built yet, but the relationships have been put in place so we don't repeat the shameful patterns of the past."

Peter H. Dougherty, director of homeless programs for the Veterans Affairs Department, said that over the past three and a half years, the department has worked with about 2,000 homeless veterans of the current wars; the city's Department of Homeless Services said that there have been a few dozen filtering through its system.

Mr. Dougherty predicted that there would be fewer homeless veterans from this war than from Vietnam, noting, "It is a very different demographic." The volunteer service members in Iraq and Afghanistan, he said, particularly those in the National Guard, are older, more likely to be married and have attained higher levels of education — and have stronger social networks to lean on.

But some advocates look at the crumbling economy and the high number of warriors with post-traumatic stress disorder and see an approaching tsunami of need. And they point out that Vietnam veterans did not appear on the streets in any large numbers until the mid-1980s, about a decade after the war ended.

New York, like many cities, at first treated the rise in homeless veterans as a short-term crisis. But the city estimates that on any given night, 625 veterans remain scattered across the shelter system and another 560 or so live on the streets (local homeless advocates say that number is low).

Mayor [Michael R. Bloomberg](#), who made reducing chronic homelessness a priority upon his election, created a task force two years ago that focused on homeless veterans and was headed in part by Robert V. Hess, who retired as an Army sergeant in 1979 and is the commissioner of the city's Department of Homeless Services.

A first goal was remodeling the city's veterans-only shelter, on Borden Avenue in Queens, a cavernous space that once housed 400 veterans on cots in communal rooms. Now, the rows of cots have been replaced by 10-by-6-foot cubicles with room for a bed, a dresser and a desk. The cubicles are subject to military-style spot inspections in which neatness can earn occupants privileges like the right to have a television or a radio.

Annie Belton, who served in the Army from 1989 to 1992, called the remodeled shelter one of the best in the system, which she has used periodically for years. "I like the fact that I close my door and lock it," she said.

Next month, Jericho Project, a New York-based nonprofit organization, will break ground on the first of the two low-rise apartment complexes near the James J. Peters V.A. Medical Center, in the Kingsbridge Heights neighborhood of the Bronx, designed with copious amounts of blond wood and stainless steel doors.

Sixty percent of the 132 units, which will be subsidized by government grants and private donations, will house currently homeless veterans; the rest are reserved for veterans on the verge of trouble. "We are looking to focus on Iraq and Afghanistan veterans," said Victoria Lyons, Jericho's executive director. "We think we can catch them before they hit the street."

The most fundamental change, and the most challenging, has been coordinating efforts between Mr. Hess's operation and the sprawling Veterans Affairs bureaucracy.

The federal government has never provided permanent supportive housing — the main tool now used by New York and other cities to keep mentally ill or addicted populations off the street. Conversely, New York generally has done well at providing housing, or at least short-term shelter, but has long waiting lists for substance-abuse and other counseling programs — automatic entitlements for veterans.

Since early this year, any veteran who attempts to enter New York's vast municipal shelter system, or who is known by a Veterans Affairs medical facility to be in need of housing, has been sent to the same place: Project Torch, a few blocks from the Brooklyn Bridge, where four people from the city and at least eight from the federal veterans' agency work side by side to match people and needs, whether for hot showers, hot meals, doctors or housing advice.

Harold M. Edmonds, who served on the aircraft carrier [Intrepid](#) as a jet mechanic in Vietnam, took advantage of the service over the summer after he tired of sleeping in the band shell in Prospect Park in Brooklyn. Over Thanksgiving, Mr. Edmonds, 62, said he moved into an apartment that Project Torch found for him on White Plains Road in the Bronx. "It's on the first floor. Everything is new."