

Ending Veterans' Homelessness

Pittsburgh Post-Gazette: [Stand Down Pittsburgh offers veterans one-stop shop for assistance](http://www.post-gazette.com/local/city/2015/09/27/Stand-Down-Pittsburgh-offers-veterans-one-stop-shop-for-assistance/stories/201509270163) (27 September, Sean D. Hamill, 1.1M online visitors/mo; Pittsburgh, PA)
<http://www.post-gazette.com/local/city/2015/09/27/Stand-Down-Pittsburgh-offers-veterans-one-stop-shop-for-assistance/stories/201509270163>

In August 2014, local political leaders and veterans' service organizations set a challenging goal of ending homelessness among veterans in Allegheny County by the end of 2015.

As of Sept. 22, through the effort known as the Pittsburgh Rapid Results Veterans' Homeless Boot Camp, 396 of 484 — or 82 percent — of the known homeless veterans in the county have found housing.

That leaves about 88 veterans still needing help; "about" that many because the homeless population is constantly in flux, as people's life stories play out creating more, and less, homeless veterans on any given day.

"We're getting close" to finding homes for all of them, said Christy Pietryga, housing program manager for Veterans Leadership Program of Western Pennsylvania. A dozen organizations "meet every week to try to get down to 'functional zero' in homelessness for veterans. But we need more landlords and more homes" for veterans.

A big push to get to zero occurred Saturday at Stage AE on the North Shore where a dizzying array of more than 60 community agencies, supported by more than 200 green-shirted volunteers, came together for the eighth annual Stand Down Pittsburgh veterans service fair.

As the smell of freshly cooked hot dogs and hamburgers cooked by volunteer veterans giving out a free meal wafted across the sidewalk outside what is normally a music venue, more than 450 veterans and their families — and some civilians — took advantage of the one-stop shop for assistance inside.

Organizations offered everything from a pop-up food pantry from the Greater Pittsburgh Community Food Bank, to free clothing, toiletries, haircuts, showers, health care referrals, housing assistance, legal assistance and even a quick blood test for glucose, cholesterol and hepatitis C put on by the Duquesne University Mylan School of Pharmacy.

"This is great," said Denise Irish, 57, who came to Stand Down for the second year in a row with her husband, Reginald, an Air Force veteran. "Last year on the South Side wasn't bad, but this is bigger and better. It will help a lot of veterans."

The Irish family picked up some food from the pantry, and has recently been helped by an ongoing series of repairs and improvements in their home in Crafton, thanks to a veterans' program Rebuilding Together Pittsburgh, which they learned about at last year's fair.

The first six Stand Down Pittsburgh events were held at Shephard's Heart church's complex in Uptown. It then moved to the Veterans Leadership Program of Western Pennsylvania on the

South Side last year. Attendance hovered around 300 to 350 attendees each year, and this year the goal was to try to double that.

To get the word out to a population that can be hard to reach, "we hit the streets," said Michael Wurschmidt, rector of Shephard's Heart, which has long helped homeless veterans.

They gave out fliers and information cards to every possible venue, from shelters, to food pantries, and provided shuttles all day Saturday to veterans' support organization locations and bus vouchers to make it easy for veterans to get there.

The result was a place where veterans quickly found the help they needed. Different organizations that might normally be located in different parts of the county were literally sitting within feet of each other.

Keith Taylor, 61, a Marine veteran living in Penn Hills, got to see that play out when he came to the fair Saturday morning looking for help with a variety of issues.

A former UPMC Health Plan community outreach employee who lost his job there two years ago, he needed help with a housing issue and quickly found someone who took him, first, to Operation Troop Appreciation, a South Hills organization that provides necessities for veterans in need, everything from new mattresses to household goods.

Monica Orluk, president of the organization, said her group could help, but he could also use a contact with the Veterans Affairs Healthcare for Homeless Veterans Program, which had a table not far from Ms. Orluk's.

After finding a contact there, Mr. Taylor went into the parking lot next to Stage AE, where they gave out free backpacks to load up with food from the pop-up food pantry, as well as a sleeping roll to go under a sleeping bag, something Mr. Taylor said he could use when he goes hunting.

"This has been great," he said, finishing up his free meal of beans and a hamburger. "All the agencies available pretty much cover everything. I'm glad to see veterans have access to this."

Trying to prevent veterans like Mr. Taylor from becoming homeless is the reason why Stand Down events will be around for the foreseeable future, said Mary Francis Pilarski, the Pittsburgh VA's program manager for health care outreach for the last 18 years.

"We don't want to have a reason to have this every year," she said. "But situational homelessness means we probably will."