

# Portland seeks housing for homeless vets

by Stephen Beaven, The Oregonian  
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Social service advocates who set out recently to survey the health of Portland's homeless population found an unsettling -- if not unexpected -- nugget of information: One in five people they interviewed was a military veteran and more than half of the veterans suffer from potentially life-threatening illnesses.

But in a cratering economy and a tight rental market, getting veterans off the street has been slowed by long delays for two local projects that could serve more than 100 homeless people.



OLIVIA BUCKS/ The Oregonian

Tom O'Cain is a Navy veteran who was facing homelessness a few years ago when he got into a Central City Concern program funded by the Department of Veterans Affairs that provides housing and other services. Now he is going to school and living in Northwest Portland. A new federal program to house and care for 70 veterans has been held up by a lack of money to pay for case workers.

And an affordable housing project proposed for South Waterfront that was supposed to include 42 apartments for veterans has been plagued by rising construction costs and other problems. But city officials are redoubling their efforts to get more veterans off the street and into permanent housing, jobs and health care.

City Commissioner Nick Fish, who oversees the Bureau of Housing and Community Development, has been meeting with federal officials to get more help from the local Department of Veterans Affairs facilities.

The city plans to share survey results, including names and contact information, so the VA can do outreach. And Fish has promised to create affordable housing for veterans at South Waterfront, even if the project proposed in 2003 is never built.

### **"It's a matter of fairness"**

Fish said caring for veterans will be "a core focus" for his office. He also thinks it's important for a city with a global reputation for anti-war sentiments to make an extra effort on behalf of those who've served in the military.

"Portland has a great opportunity to show we can distinguish between how we feel about the war and our respect for the people who served and our commitment to veterans," Fish said. "It's not a Democrat or Republican issue. It's a matter of fairness."

The ongoing survey of Portland's homeless population, which started last month, included interviews with 135 veterans, 67 of whom have lived on the street for six months or more and reported at least one serious medical condition that could lead to death if not treated.

Of those 135, only 49 reported receiving health care from the VA, which offers a variety of services for homeless vets in partnerships with local agencies.

### **Veterans use only 10 of 70 housing vouchers**

One such program includes a federal housing voucher supplied by the Housing Authority of Portland and mandatory case management services from the VA to help veterans with job training, mental health counseling and addiction treatment.

The housing authority received 70 of the vouchers in May. But only 10 veterans have used the vouchers to get housing, in part because the local VA didn't have the money to supply the case management services until August.

And it was only recently that two case workers were assigned to provide services to go with the vouchers, said Matthew Burroughs, who supervises the Portland area's VA programs for the homeless.

"In the best of possible worlds," he added, "we would have had the staff standing by when the (vouchers) got here."

### **Local veterans office urged "to ramp up"**

The housing authority hopes to get another 70 vouchers next year.

"We've been trying and working very hard with the local veterans office to understand the situation and urge them to ramp up," said Shelley Marchesi, a spokeswoman for the housing authority.

Some of those vouchers were expected to be used at an affordable apartment building planned for the tony South Waterfront district. The 200-unit building was originally scheduled to be completed by December 2006. Late last year, the city decided to include about 42 apartments for veterans.

### **Unaware they are eligible for services**

But design changes, the failing economy and rising building costs have delayed the start of construction. It may be a year before the project moves forward, according to the Portland Development Commission, which is managing the work at South Waterfront. Current plans include apartments for up to 50 veterans.

There are, of course, other obstacles for homeless vets. Some are discouraged by the tangled government bureaucracy. Others are simply unaware of all the services for which they're eligible.

"I think that's one of the biggest problems on the street," said Tom O'Cain, a 54-year-old Navy veteran who got into a Central City Concern program after hearing about it from another vet.

"They don't know this stuff is available."

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