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AL program seeks to help more veterans find, keep housing

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By Lindsey Rogers, Reporter [CONNECT](#)

MONTGOMERY, AL (WSFA) - The United Way of Central Alabama is shedding new light on a program that's been helping veterans across the state. It's called "Priority Veteran" and it's designed to aid those veterans who are homeless or at risk of losing their homes.

More than 1,750 homeless or near homeless veterans in Alabama have already received help from Priority Veteran, but officials know there's still many unserved veterans they can assist.

That's why they're making an aggressive push to reach out to the family members, neighbors, friends and church members of these unseen veterans to encourage them to get help.

"We help them with getting into housing or we can help them from losing their housing. We also provide financial coaching and resources in the community that can help the veterans maintain their housing stability and also their financial stability," said Tommy Woodard, a case manager.

Priority Veteran, in partnership with United Way of Central Alabama, provides vets with federal, state and local resources.

It started offering services to veterans in October 2013 with a \$2 million Supportive Services for Veteran Families grant from the Department of Veterans Affairs.

It provides veterans with intensive one-on-one assistance to locate stable permanent housing and help them remain financially stable.

Case managers help veterans with needs such as: creating a Housing Stability Plan, accessing medical or mental health services, enrolling for veteran's benefits, job search assistance, and financial coaching.

They assist veterans in their housing search, whether they're looking online or in person. The case managers will also meet the veteran at a real estate office or apartment complex.

Some of the veterans have been homeless for a while and the process can be very stressful.

"Our organization assists homeless veterans into housing by helping those who are homeless to find affordable, stable housing and those who are at risk of losing their home to help them maintain it," said case manager Nichole Zanders. "We locate our veterans through the United Way hotline so they can call in if they need assistance. We also go to the VA and different homeless shelters."

The statewide program has case managers in several offices, but can also arrange to meet clients in rural areas.

"Transportation can often be a barrier for small-town residents. We want to be as accessible as possible," said Emily Cook with the United Way of Central Alabama. "It's not unusual, especially in rural areas, for them to be off the grid and fall through the cracks. So we're asking everyone in the general public: If you know a veteran who needs housing help, send them to us."

The program covers all of Alabama, except Mobile and Baldwin Counties, and even helps veterans in Troup and Muscogee Counties in Georgia.

"We allow the veteran to find housing, their own housing because we can't pick a place for them. They have to feel safe in their own environment. So they do get a choice of where they live but we want them to maintain stable housing so we ask that they look at what they can afford and stay in their range, depending on the income they receive," Zanders said.

For Tommy Woodard, a veteran, working as a case manager with the program has been rewarding on a personal level. He served in the Army from 2002-2006 and spent time in Iraq.

"It really doesn't matter if you've served three years or 30 years in the military. A veteran is an individual that's made the decision to take time out of his or her life to serve their country and I believe that, in turn, our country should serve our veterans. It's impacted me that now I'm able to give back and help the people who have served our country," he said.

Adrias Scott, an Army veteran, credits Priority Veteran with helping get his life back on track. He deployed during Operation Iraqi Freedom and returned home in 2004. He tried to make the transition into society, but struggled with socializing and adjusting back into normal, everyday life.

He maintained work for several years and reached out to the VA for assistance but found it hard to connect with key resources.

Then, last year, he was diagnosed with an illness and was unable to work.

"It came down to a point where I myself needed help," he said. "It can be kind of difficult for veterans to find information they need that's very helpful to us. When we do seek help, it's like we're getting closed doors. I had been providing for myself for many years, but then I suddenly couldn't afford my cost of living and couldn't take care of myself financially."

He was referred to Priority Veteran by a fellow veteran and was able to stay living in the same location.

"When I reached out to Priority Veteran, they didn't hesitate at all. They took me under their wing, guaranteed me that everything would be okay and that I would regain my financial stability. That's what they did. They stuck with me from the beginning of the process all the way to the end," he said. "I was one of those veterans that was at risk of losing their home so when Priority Veteran stepped in, it was such a relief and I didn't have any worries after that."

Scott has a degree in information technology and he started his own company, an online advertising and marketing company that does graphic design and helps advertise small businesses and brands. He says Priority Veteran has stuck with him, providing support and guidance as he continues developing his entrepreneurial endeavors.

"Once I came into contact with Priority Veteran, they let me know that they were different from any other program out there and that they were here to help the veteran," he said. "Even after they're done assisting you with housing and finances, they're still there to give you that extra push or drive, whatever that veteran may need at that particular time."

Although flawless counts are impossible to come by – the transient nature of homeless populations presents a major difficulty – the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) estimates that 39,471 veterans are homeless on any given night.

About 1.4 million other veterans, meanwhile, are considered at risk of homelessness due to poverty, lack of support networks, and dismal living conditions in overcrowded or substandard housing.

The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) states that the nation's homeless veterans are predominantly male, with roughly 9 percent being female. The majority are single, live in urban areas, and suffer from mental illness, alcohol and/or substance abuse, or co-occurring disorders. About 11 percent of the adult homeless population are veterans.

Homeless veterans are younger on average than the total veteran population. Approximately 9 percent are between the ages of 18 and 30, and 41 percent are between the ages of 31 and 50. Conversely, only 5 percent of all veterans are between the ages of 18 and 30, and less than 23 percent are between 31 and 50.

America's homeless veterans have served in World War II, the Korean War, Cold War, Vietnam War, Grenada, Panama, Lebanon, Persian Gulf War, Afghanistan and Iraq (OEF/OIF), and the military's anti-drug cultivation efforts in South America. Nearly half of homeless veterans served during the Vietnam era. Two-thirds served our country for at least three years, and one-third were stationed in a war zone.

"Veterans that need help a lot of times don't really seek it and it may be because they're worried about what people may think of them so they may hide the fact that they're needing assistance. It should be a collaborative effort between all the community resources to locate the veterans who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless and get them to programs like Priority Veteran so that we can help them," Woodard said.

If a veteran needs assistance, they can call Priority Veteran at 334-440-8162 or go to priorityveteran.org.

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