



NEW ENGLAND CENTER FOR HOMELESS VETERANS

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Gifts of Hope Center helps veterans stay off the street

“With demands for services continuing to rise, Wicked Local has designated the nonprofit as this year’s recipient of its annual Gifts of Hope fundraising campaign.”

The first in a five part series of reports being published in December in local papers throughout Greater Boston, Gatehouse Media and www.wickedlocal.com selected the NECHV as the 2012 recipient for the “Gifts of Hope” features.

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NECHV President and CEO, Andy McCawley

**WICKED
LOCAL** **NEWTON**
WITH NEWS FROM THE NEWTON TAB

By Trevor Jones
Wicked Local
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So for 23 years, right in the heart of downtown Boston, the New England Center for Homeless Veterans has worked to assist men and women achieve independent and dignified living conditions by overcoming what led them to be on the street in the first place. With demands for services continuing to rise, Wicked Local has designated the nonprofit as this year’s recipient of its annual Gifts of Hope fundraising campaign.

More than 1,000 veterans find assistance--including on-site housing, meals, career counseling and clinical services--at the Court Street facility annually. In the past year alone, the center served 150,000 meals and found independent housing for more than 400 veterans.

President and CEO Andy McCawley said any number of contributing factors could lead to homelessness for veterans. Some of those issues are unique to those with military backgrounds, but many are not. He pointed to catalysts such as unemployment, disability, behavioral health problems and a lack of support systems.

"Homelessness is more a symptom, less a cause," said McCawley.

Significant strides have been made in addressing this problem in recent years. The number of homeless veterans in Massachusetts has fallen by 21 percent since January 2011 – a decrease that is nearly twice that of the national average, according to the U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs.

But at the same time, the number of people seeking services at the Court Street facility has increased by 30 percent, with 75 to 80 more veterans seeking housing on any given night compared to one year ago.

Center officials can't say exactly why they've seen such a sharp increase, but it's likely tied to the sluggish economy, the lack of affordable housing in the area and a broadening of eligibility and services offered. In response, the center is currently working to add about 30 more permanent apartments in the building.

McCawley said the next challenge for the center is to understand the pathways to homelessness better, and to intercede before a veteran reaches the point where they've lost their home.

"Veterans have provided this country a lot and they are especially deserving of being provided services, but sometime just having the services in place is not adequate," said McCawley. "Being able to have outreach and connecting the services with the needs is especially important."

McCawley, a former Navy pilot and commanding officer of the USS Abraham Lincoln aircraft carrier, said the most rewarding part of his service was the opportunity to serve with young men who realize they're part of something bigger than themselves.

That sense of comradery can still be felt in the halls of the center, according to McCawley, who said he often feels like he's walking through someone's living room when he comes to work. He said he finds inspiration on a daily basis, from the veteran pulling off a "Cinderella-style" recovery to the little moments of men and women slowly gaining back their dignity.

While the center relies heavily on state and federal grants to fulfill its mission, roughly 30 percent, or \$2.4 million, of the total budget comes from private donations. Those private funds allow the nonprofit to reshape itself in the face of changing demographics and demands.

McCawley said the building is a great asset because of the flexibility it provides in offering temporary and permanent housing for up to 350 veterans each night, but it's also an aging structure that requires care. Because most government grants don't cover capital needs and

building maintenance, donations play a key role in improving accessibility for aging vets and rebuilding spaces to house innovative new programs.

How you can help

You can donate money to the New England Center for Homeless Veterans.

Send a check or make an online donation. Check may be mailed to the New England Center for Homeless Veterans, 17 Court St., Boston, MA 02108 ATTN: Gifts of Hope. Or visit www.nechv.org or call 617-371-1882.