

Combating homelessness

Jim Gehring remembers the day he received a call from a Maine congressional office inquiring if the community had a program that could help a local homeless veteran. After asking around and realizing that no specialized, streamlined services existed for his brothers and sisters in greatest need, Gehring, the Adjutant of Smart- Ricker Chapter 10 in Presque Isle, Maine, went right to work ensuring every veteran in Aroostook County has a roof over their head.

The Navy veteran reached out to Don Carson, senior social worker at the VA Caribou Community Based Outpatient Clinic, and Stephen Eyler, executive director at Homeless Services of Aroostook. The three brainstormed how they could coordinate their efforts in order to best serve veterans in their community.

“We started from ground zero and worked our way up,” said Gehring. “We said, ‘Here’s what we need to provide. Now how can we work together to make that happen?’”

It didn’t take long before the trio created an initiative that serves as a shining example of public/private partnerships.

From Homeless Shelter to a Place to Call Home

The program begins by identifying veterans, and that starts at the Sister Mary O’Donnell Shelter, which is operated by Homeless Services of Aroostook. Eyler, who served in the Marine Corps for 10 years and is a lifetime DAV member, is committed to serving his brothers- and sisters-in-arms.

“There’s a bond, camaraderie and fellowship that is established through service,” said Eyler. “We all wore the uniform and all paid the dues. We’re in this journey together.

“Veterans tug at my heart because I am one, and I want to make sure any benefits that are available to them are made known,” continued Eyler. “When I moved into the area four years ago, one of the first connections I wanted to make was with the local DAV Chapter, because we’re both serving folks in need.”

When an individual comes to Eyler’s team, an intake social worker asks a variety of questions at check-in, including if they are a veteran. Once a veteran is identified, the social worker notifies Gehring or Second Jr. Vice Commander Denis Madore, who, like Gehring, is a Chapter Service Officer.

A Chapter Service Officer then heads over to the shelter to interview the veteran and determine whether or not they have been enrolled in the VA health care system.

“If not, we have them fill out the necessary paperwork and get them in touch with the local VA hospital,” said Gehring. “We also identify any additional servicereLATED benefits not yet filed for and offer immediate representation for the claims process.”

The next step is to contact Carson, who heads up the homeless-veteran initiatives at the VA Caribou Community Based Outpatient Clinic, the first rural VA clinic in the nation. He schedules a medical appointment for the veteran, usually within the next 24 to 48 hours.

“The veteran comes in, receives a full medical assessment, and I screen them for mental health issues,” said Carson. “These services are free, but prior to implementing this program, veterans would come into the shelter and learn about the care, but most of the time they wouldn’t come to the clinic.



Smart-Ricker Chapter 10
2nd Jr. Vice Commander
Denis Madore (left) and
Smart-Ricker Auxiliary
Unit 10 Adjutant Diana
Gehring (center)
welcome veteran Jason
Voisine to his new
home.

“There were travel barriers but not anymore, thanks to DAV,” said Carson. “DAV volunteers make sure transportation is not a problem for the veteran.” The volunteer drivers pick up the veterans and take them 20 miles from the shelter to the medical facility, wait several hours during the appointments and then return them back to the shelter.

A soldier who served during Vietnam, Carson is dedicated to helping his fellow veterans receive the care they’ve earned. “It is a special privilege to work with veterans,” said Carson. “There’s something deeply gratifying to be able to pull from my experience as a soldier, to have that be relevant to some of the people I help today.”

Gehring works with Carson, who also serves as the HUD-VASH Coordinator of Aroostook County, to obtain housing vouchers for the veteran. After the HUD-VASH application is approved and the veteran has a firm moving date, DAV Smart-Ricker Auxiliary Unit 10 Adjutant and Treasurer Diana Gehring springs into action and takes the reins from her spouse.

“I call the Auxiliary members—it’s always a treat for us to shop for the veterans,” said Diana Gehring. “We get a wish list from the clinic and purchase as much from that as we can.”

The Unit typically spends around \$200 on necessities such as shower curtains, toilet paper, dish soap, personal hygiene items, silverware, blankets and toasters.

“We pay for the items from our general fund, and then comes the best part—delivery,” said Diana. The Unit also provides dinner, so the veteran can enjoy a hot first meal in their home.

“I don’t know how to explain the feeling that comes over you when you give a homeless veteran all the necessary things to fill his or her own place,” she continued. “One veteran in particular, when we delivered his items, there were tears running down his face. It choked everyone up.”

The support does not end when the veteran has the keys to their new home. Once they are established, both the Unit and Chapter seek out employment opportunities for them.

“We had an instance with a young man who we were able to get off the street, into his own place and then have a job just a few weeks later,” said Jim Gehring. “That’s how it’s supposed to work.”

The Program’s Success

Diana Gehring encourages DAV Junior Auxiliary members to participate in the program as well. “It teaches youth how fortunate they are, and I want them to be aware, if you have enough to give, then give.”

The Unit’s focus on giving back is met with enthusiasm. Its Junior Auxiliary lays claim to the only active charter in the

state.

“Diana and the Auxiliary have taken this program to the next level,” said Jim Gehring. “Successful Chapters and Units can’t survive without one another. We have seen growth—35 percent on both sides since starting the program in December 2012.”

“Behind every good Chapter, there’s a good Unit,” proclaimed his wife. “It’s blending different approaches, and two heads are better than one!”

She explained that it helps that both she and her husband are Adjutants. “We will be watching TV and say, ‘Oh and by the way, put this on agenda’ or ‘Did you remember to do this?’ It helps we are right across the room from each other,” she said, laughing.

“Six years ago, our attendance was probably four to five people at each Chapter or Unit meeting. Now when we meet, we have between 40 and 50 people,” said Jim. “We ask our membership what they want, and they want to give back to a program that makes a difference.”

He attributes increased numbers to dedicated Chapter Service Officers out in the field, a sense of family within the Chapter and Unit, and especially the overwhelming interest in the homeless veterans program.

Carson, Eyler and the Gehrings credit the program’s success to the solid partnership between the organizations. “Everyone involved with this program knows what their role is and how it works to help each veteran,” said Carson. “That’s the magic of the group.”

Eyler stressed that implementing a program like this doesn’t have to be difficult. “It’s connecting the right people and their services. The hardest part was getting everyone to the table. But once we were there, it was easy to put the pieces of the puzzle together. We’re all serving the same people.”

Communication is essential to the group. "Every month that we help a veteran, we meet to review what went well, what didn't and how we can improve in the future," said Jim Gehring. He stressed that it is a team effort with a lot of follow-up, but well worth the effort of serving fellow veterans.

"The Chapter and Unit recognized that veteran homelessness is a national tragedy," said DAV National Headquarters Executive Director Barry Jesinoski. "So they took action and joined forces with the VA Caribou Community Based Outpatient Clinic and Homeless Services of Aroostook to create a program that serves our brothers and sisters with the greatest need.

"The initiative's success speaks volumes to the importance of government and public- and private-sector partnerships and how these relationships can positively impact veterans," continued Jesinoski. "These efforts are among many going on nationwide by our members to make sure we don't leave our own behind."

There is no better endorsement of the program's success than from the veterans who have been assisted through it. "This program has taken enormous weight off my already burdened shoulders. The DAV rides, [VA] medication and health care have made it easier for me to concentrate on finding employment, thus leading to a new home," said veteran Dana Norton. "Also knowing that when I do find a home, the DAV Auxiliary will assist me getting started is a huge relief. I was surprised and glad that the DAV stepped up so quickly."

Since the program's inception, five veterans have been moved from the shelter into their own apartments, and the Chapter and Unit are currently in the process of housing one more.

"We may be a small Chapter, but we're doing big things," said Jim Gehring.