

From homeless to hero



DAV volunteers with the Department of New Jersey leaned on creative solutions during the COVID-19 pandemic, offering mobile stand downs to help address community needs and maintain safety standards.

DAV member makes it his mission to help homeless, at-risk veterans in New Jersey

After serving in the Army from 2000 to 2005, Jordan Carlson struggled with his transition to civilian life. Bouncing between homelessness and a steady home life, Carlson—now the commander of DAV Chapter 80 in Glassboro, New Jersey—found it difficult to land on his feet.

“I’ve been through some challenging times,” said Carlson. “I’m sure most veterans know, when you’re dealing with the VA, sometimes they don’t give you the correct rating or give you a lower rating on your claim. And because of that, you obtain fewer benefits than you should. For me, that was a challenging period of my life.”

So when he was tasked with leading the Department of New

Jersey's new homeless committee, Carlson immediately felt a deep connection to the mission.

According to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, New Jersey has nearly 600 homeless veterans—though many more are likely at risk. Out of the roughly 371,000 veterans in the state, 86,921 veterans live with housing problems, such as quality, crowding or cost.

Partnered with other veterans organizations, Department Adjutant Johnnie Walker began working on a campaign that would offer multiple Homeless Veteran Stand Downs throughout the state.

“We actually began by having one giant stand down in Atlantic City,” said Walker. “We did that for two years, and it was very successful. However, by the third year, the pandemic had taken over and everything was shut down.”

Unsure of how to keep the momentum going, DAV agreed with other local veterans service organizations to host “mobile” or “mini” stand downs that would go on throughout the state.

As part of the campaign, DAV members made their primary focus helping homeless veterans properly submit their claims to the VA to ensure they would receive their full benefits. While assisting veterans with submitting claims, DAV provided them with hygiene kits and clothing as well.



Though veterans make up only about 6% of New Jersey's homeless population, DAV Chapter

80 Commander Jordan Carlson—who experienced similar circumstances—remains committed to assisting in as many cases as possible.

“We aimed to start in Southern New Jersey first,” said Walker. “That’s when the state commander and I came up with the idea to start a homeless committee within the DAV Department of New Jersey, and we reached out to Jordan Carlson.”

Carlson was a new commander and had just reorganized Chapter 80. He was able to get new and current members involved and enthusiastic about working with DAV.

“The fact that Jordan was homeless himself made it an easy selection for the department to ask him to chair our homeless committee,” said Walker.

Carlson has proved a staunch advocate and has turned his focus to getting these veterans the benefits and health care they need.

“Between mental health resources and getting them into the VA health care system, they need to be enrolled,” said Carlson. “Whether they’re homeless or at risk, we want to get them housing, employment resources and health care to get them up off the streets.”

Since beginning this mobile program, Carlson and the department have held four stand downs throughout southern New Jersey. At their most recent event, DAV filed VA paperwork for all 27 veterans staying at a shelter in Camden, New Jersey. Three of those veterans are now members of DAV, sponsored by local chapters.

This is just the beginning, Carlson and Walker said. They soon

hope to cover the entire state, holding stand downs in each community to make sure veterans are able to attain self-sufficiency, employment and health care.

“We hope that Jordan is going to be around for a long time with DAV,” said Walker. “He has been a real asset to this department. With him, we think this program can last for years to come.”