

VA Clinic Sponsors Stand Down as One of Many Services

Story and Photo by Kristin Elmore

Surrealism shed its bright light on the streets of New York City, the halls of the Pentagon, and the fields of Pennsylvania on September 11, 2001. News of such a dismal disaster gripped the hearts of Americans as widespread encouragement for our country and our troops became the norm. Meanwhile, in Anytown, USA, homeless veterans, long forgotten about by the country they struggled to protect, fight a different battle. Only this time, the battle is against the harsh realities of life on the street. One Austin organization dedicates itself to aiding in this ongoing battle. East Austin's Department of Veterans Affairs Clinic stands to provide medical and psychiatric care for Veterans in the Austin area. One program in the clinic specifically targets homeless veterans. Program Specialist and Outreach Clinician Andrew Miller discussed the details of the program with me to pass along to the CTOSH community.



Judith Watford (left) and Andrew Miller of the Vass Health Care for Homeless Veterans program.

According to Miller, the goal of the Health Care for Homeless Veterans program is to reach out to the homeless veteran community in an effort to connect them with the health care services to which they are entitled. The clinic stands to offer veterans a variety of health care options including: medical treatment, substance abuse treatment, psychiatric care, and benefits counseling, as certain veterans are eligible for pensions. The Austin VA Clinic is part of the Central Texas Veteran Health Care System, which includes: a medical hospital in Temple and a psychiatric hospital in Waco.

Despite their straight forward goals, the Health Care for Homeless Veterans program is inevitably faced with challenges in their quest to provide health care to the homeless veteran community. Beating the streets with his co-worker Judith Wofford, a nurse for the Health Care for Homeless program, Miller's goals to provide health care to those in need is not an effortless mission. Miller spoke of challenges in communicating directly with the homeless: Many have been burned before and are skeptical. Unconvinced of those wishing to reach out to them, homeless veterans in the Austin area may be reluctant to take advantage of opportunities for health care. For this reason, building trust and rapport with members of the homeless community is a necessary, but somewhat daunting task. Through experience, Miller has found persistence is key in gaining the trust essential to building a hale and hearty relationship with these individuals. As with many other Austin area agencies, the program is challenged with meeting the needs of the ever increasing homeless population.

In an ongoing effort to aid homeless veterans in achieving their goals, be it employment, housing, or health care, the VA Clinic is sponsoring its 4th annual Stand Down. This year's Stand Down will be held September 20, 2003, at Doris Miller Auditorium, Rosewood Park at 2300 Rosewood Avenue from 9:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m. This resource fair for the homeless is considered a one stop shop where 40- plus agencies will be in attendance to offer their services to the homeless. Among the services provided will be: assistance in attaining an ID card, applications for housing, employment assistance, and many more. Considering the every day tasks taken for granted by most, members of the homeless community are continuously behind the curve. Scrapping together change for the bus, acquiring suitable clothing for an interview, and making themselves presentable without access to a shower, dental care, or a haircut keep homeless individuals on the downward side of the snowball. This continuous cycle is what inspired the VA Clinic to sponsor the fair. The notion of Stand Down originally comes from military jargon. Many Vietnam veterans will recognize the term as meaning break from the battle, a time to enjoy respite from war in order to take a shower, have a haircut, and relax. This notion rings true in the spirit of Stand Down. Ideally, the program hopes to provide a festive environment to those who fight their own war against the streets. Special recognition is due to members of the Stand Down Steering Committee. They are: Susan Griffin Chambers, Greta Gutman, Claudia McWhorter, Patsy Rider, Cliff Taylor, Mary Rychlik, Karolina Powalki, Mari Martinez, Erica Borman, Andrew

Miller, Judith Wofford, Maria Kimble, Alison Schmidt, Judi Garcia, Mary Eubanks, Jay Filderman, George Ruiz, James Rider, Roy Wenmohs, Lisa Glenn, Leslie Hays, George Brown, Emily Schneider, and William G. Rossick. The effort put forth by these individuals is both priceless and appreciated.

All honorably discharged veterans having served the minimal time in service are eligible to receive services at the VA Clinic. Should you have questions, please contact Andrew Miller at 512-389-7104 or via email at andrew.miller@med.va.gov, or you may contact Judith Wofford at 512-389-7167 or via email at judith.wofford@med.va.gov.