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## Some of L.A. County's most vulnerable vets to get badly needed care

*Project 60 aims to save lives of 60 ill and fragile vets by offering housing and support.*

February 16, 2011 | Steve Lopez

*White male, age 69. Homeless for 15 years and three months. Usually sleeps at the beach or along a riverbed. Has hepatitis C and suffers from mental illness. Has no health insurance. Has been incarcerated.*

*African American male, age 61. Homeless for seven years and nine months. Usually sleeps at the beach. Has cancer, kidney disease, liver disease, hepatitis C, tuberculosis. Suffers from mental illness. Has been to the emergency room three times in the last three months. Has been physically attacked. Drinks alcohol daily and has been incarcerated.*

*White female, age 51. Homeless for nine years and nine months. Usually sleeps on the street. Has cancer, heart disease, hepatitis C, tuberculosis and suffers from mental illness. Drinks daily, injects drugs, has been physically attacked and suffered a brain injury.*

Any idea what these three people have in common?

They're military veterans.

Reliable estimates tell us there are more than 7,000 homeless veterans in Los Angeles County. About 1,400 of them are thought to be in such bad shape, like those listed above, that they may not be with us much longer.

On Wednesday in West Los Angeles, at the Veterans Affairs facility on Wilshire Boulevard, officials from the V.A., Los Angeles County and other agencies will announce the launch of Project 60, a long-overdue program aimed at saving the lives of 60 extremely sick and fragile veterans by offering them housing and support services.

It will take a while before we know whether the two-year project works, but I like the idea of it. Why, though, has it taken so long to take such an obvious step?

Lots of reasons, including the fact that we blithely send people off to serve, but don't like paying the bills for the trouble they bring home. Whether they were drafted into the Vietnam War or volunteered for duty in Afghanistan and Iraq, I don't care. I opposed all three wars, but I say each of us is shamed when dazed vets, many of whom risked their lives serving their country, end up suffering and dying on our streets.

For the last couple of years, Michelle Wildy of the VA Greater Los Angeles Healthcare System and Flora Gil Krisiloff of L.A. County Supervisor Zev Yaroslavsky's office, have been determined to make Project 60 happen.

Modeled after the county's Project 50 on skid row, the idea was to use the "housing first" model, meaning that five dozen vets will be offered a place to sleep in the hope that they'll then take advantage of all the services — medical treatment, mental health counseling, addiction rehab, job training — that they need to get their lives back on track.

"Housing first" models have their critics, mostly because the clients aren't required to get sober initially, and many have relapses while housed. But for some people with hard-core addictions and mental problems, that model is the only hope for recovery, and the VA has come to that realization after years of resistance.

There's no new money available for Project 60. Instead, four nonprofits — the Ocean Park Community Center in Santa Monica, the St. Joseph Center in Venice, the Hollywood branch of Step Up on Second, and the San Fernando Valley Mental Health Center — will help identify and treat homeless veterans, who will be housed with VA vouchers.

Vets often don't know they're entitled to benefits or they're reluctant to begin the bureaucratic horror of actually applying for them. Now, for the 60, that should all be streamlined with multiple agencies working on the same team.

"We're going after the most vulnerable and chronically ill first," Wildy said. And if Project 60 works, maybe it will grow to Project 600, she said.

There will, of course, be a crush of vets coming back from Afghanistan and Iraq with post-traumatic stress disorder, traumatic brain injury, depression and other problems. Some vets already home are either not being diagnosed — in some cases because treatment for such disorders can be difficult and expensive, so the military doesn't care to make the diagnosis — or they're being over-medicated.

What's really needed, for many vets, is the kind of supportive, monitored housing that Project 60 is designed to offer. But 60 slots isn't enough, and I know I've asked this before, but it bears repeating:

If we have 7,400 homeless veterans in Los Angeles County, why do we have abandoned former medical buildings on the VA property in West Los Angeles, and what if anything are people like Sen. Dianne Feinstein and Rep. Henry Waxman doing about it?

The three thumbnail sketches at the top of this column were provided to me by the Project 60 folks, who have been interviewing veterans and compiling a vulnerability registry. No names were divulged to me; just the bare outlines of shattered lives, and here are a few more:

*White male, 62. Attended college. Homeless for 12 years and two months. Sleeps on the streets. Has heart problems, liver damage, suffers from mental illness and had a brain injury.*

*African American female, 52. Attended college. Has been homeless for 13 years, nine months. Sleeps at the beach. Has been to the hospital three times in the last year for heat exhaustion, liver disease and hepatitis C. Drinks alcohol daily, suffers from mental illness and has been involuntarily committed. Has been incarcerated.*

*White male, 62. Has been homeless 11 years and nine months. Sleeps in his car. Has heart disease, a substance abuse history and suffers from mental illness.*

Veterans all, and the list goes on and on and on.

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