

Local Desert Storm veteran stands down on homeless prevention

By **Paul Sisolak** 07/30/2009



Rex Belisle is well acquainted with the term “standing down.”

“When the conflict ends, we stand down. It’s a point of rest. These guys come in, and it’s a point of rest,” he said.

Belisle had gone down to Ventura’s National Guard Armory last weekend to offer his support and services as an addiction treatment counselor at the 17th annual local outreach event, which gave some much needed respite, food and medical services to hundreds of veterans. Bunked in mock military-style encampments, many of them were homeless.

Belisle could relate to the ex-Army, Navy and Marine men who’ve since fallen on hard times since their wartime campaigns ended. Only four years ago, Belisle himself took part in Stand Down: homeless, drug addled, suffering from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, and prone to outbursts of violence, a far cry from his Army days spent in the Middle East.

Belisle now wants to aid his fellow veterans seeking the same help he once needed by setting up a special rehabilitation and therapy program for veterans suffering from similar post-military problems. If the Army vet, who interns out of Alternative Action Programs (AAP) in Oxnard, can generate enough interest from men and women in need of help, it would allow one more outlet for veterans often reluctant to seek help.

“What we’re hoping to do with this veterans program, before that veteran gets into the system, before he gets in trouble, we want to be there as a help to counsel them with their PTSD, with their drug addiction,” he said.

Belisle and Mike Juarez, who is a certified addiction treatment counselor at AAP, hope to get a proper counseling pilot program streamlined for veterans up and running within the next month. Both men, who would jointly head up the program, are working out the cost, criteria and scheduling.

“It’s for anyone coming back from combat to help with the readjustment back in,” Belisle said. He pointed to the local soldier, constantly deployed from the Port Hueneme Naval Base, for one.

Twenty years ago, Belisle enlisted in the U.S. Army and, to his surprise, was deployed to the Middle East not more than six months later to fight in the Desert Storm conflict.

“One of the things my drill sergeant told me, ‘You’ll never see military combat,’ ” Belisle recalls. “Sixteen months later, I’m in the middle of the Iraqi desert.”

It wasn’t a matter of a few months later that the firefights, carnage and the daily fear of being shot at any moment began to take their toll on him, and Belisle began drinking heavily.

“When I was in the service, it was common to drink,” he said. “That was the go-to place. Later on, when I moved back to my hometown and I started seeing people I knew before involved with drugs, drugs was the way to cope and deal with something.”

A severe desensitization to violence soon followed.

“Seeing a dead body on the side of the road, I’d pay no attention to it, like seeing a dead dog on the side of the road,” he explained. “Hitting the next red light, you’d have forgotten about it.”

After returning stateside, Belisle endured problems readjusting to regular civilian life, and in what’s long been coined as PTSD, spiraled further into methamphetamine use and domestic violence.

Juarez weighed in. “I think it’s true of vets returning,” he said. “They don’t know what’s going on. They turn to drugs and alcohol. They’re self-medicating.”

Things got worse for Belisle, and by 2005, addicted, he found himself at the armory’s 13th Stand Down, the only time he sought help of any kind.

That part alone — the homelessness factor — Belisle hopes to raise the greatest awareness. He joins other homeless prevention advocates who decry the apathy toward a growing homeless problem in Ventura County, a large percentage of which includes ex-military.

“An inordinate amount of them are veterans,” says Peter Brown, the City of Ventura’s homeless services director.

If Belisle and Juarez can get their program started, they would become one more outlet for troubled veterans in Ventura County, where over half a dozen services operate. According to Jennie Pittman, a senior human services manager for the county, they include a community medical clinic in Oxnard, a Veterans Affairs center in Downtown Ventura and a disabled veterans transportation program. There’s also the Ventura Rescue Mission in Oxnard.

In November, she said, a state residential home for veterans is expected to open its doors.

Still, with the dearth of services available, many homeless veterans fall into one category of chronically homeless people Brown says are often staunchly resistant to services. Belisle was one of them for a time.

“I think there’s a definite connection between the lack of services and the theater of a wartime situation, which is not adequately handled upon their return (home),” Brown says.

The lack of attention to veterans’ needs began after Vietnam, according to Brown, a time when PTSD was not recognized as a proper disorder; instead, veterans were dismissed as being no more than “shell shocked.” Coupled with the closure of state hospitals and mental health services in the 1970s, the years-long ignorance offers explanations why a large portion of homeless veterans are of the Vietnam generation. They often refuse help, Brown says, because many are unaware that help exists.

Belisle says the younger, new wave of veterans — those serving in the Iraqi conflict — are just as important.

“We’re going to have at least 20,000 returning vets in this area alone,” he says.

For them, digging out of addiction and homelessness is fighting another kind of war. Belisle knows firsthand.

“It took some work to get out of there,” he said. “If no one was there to give me a helping hand, it would have been the same cycle over and over again.”

He continued, “All of them, veterans or not, we’re still brothers in arms. Some of those guys, in their heads, are on the battlefield.”

Alternative Action Programs is located at 314 W. 4th St. in Oxnard, and can be contacted at 988-1112.

For a list of services and programs for veterans and the homeless, visit countyofventura.org.

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