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Operation Sacred Trust Combats Veteran Homelessness In South Florida With \$1 Million Grant

By Christiana Lilly



A group of veterans who have received help from Operation Sacred Trust.

Operation Sacred Trust

While the nation thanks its veterans this weekend for their service to the country, many of those veterans are struggling on the streets of South Florida.

Cedric Halyard was one of them but he has gone from a homeless drug user to the outreach director of Operation Sacred Trust, which works to get homeless veterans off the streets of Miami-Dade and Broward counties.

An effort by Carrfour Supportive Housing, PAIRS Foundation, Henderson Behavioral Health, and Neighborhood Housing Services of South Florida, Operation Sacred Trust allows the four nonprofits use their expertise to help homeless veterans like Halyard.

Recently, Carrfour received a \$1 million grant from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, which will help provide temporary financial assistance, training and case management, as well as preventing homelessness by helping veterans pay their bills and expenses.

The need for this is huge: According to the VA's National Center on Homelessness Among Veterans, in 2011, 16 percent of the country's homeless population were veterans.

In Florida, there are roughly 5,600 homeless veterans -- almost a fifth of them living in Broward and Miami-Dade counties. They account for 8.4 percent of the national's homeless veteran population, giving Florida the third highest homeless veteran population after California and New York.

Halyard first joined the United States Army in 1984. In his four years, he served six months in the Middle East during Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm. But when he returned, he felt unequipped to live in mainstream society, and masked his hurt and anger with drugs.

"I felt hopeless," he told The Huffington Post. "I felt no one cared, and I felt too proud to go to the VA -- the very same agency that saved my life."

Halyard lost his family and lived on the Miami streets for a year, using the survival skills he learned in the military.

“I got to the point where I would work and bring home my check and I wouldn’t pay any of my bills. I would use it to buy drugs,” he said. “I went out into a situation to purchase drugs and came back, and my car had been stolen with everything that I had.”

Finally, putting away his pride, he went to the VA for 90 days of in-patient drug rehabilitation and then moved into a halfway house. From there, he became a certified licensed practical nurse, purchased a house, reconciled with his young children, and got a job helping the homeless at Carrfour.

Now, he is the outreach director of Operation Sacred Trust, where he shares his experiences to encourage them to start anew.

“I knew they needed a sympathetic ear, someone who has been there before, someone who has walked the trenches, who has walked the streets, who has lived the streets,” Halyard said. “You know how they say men don’t cry? That’s a lie. I cried plenty of nights, plenty of days.”

One of the men that Halyard was able to get through to was Alvin Romer, who served two stints in Vietnam during his 20 years in the Army. On the battlefield, alcohol and raw drugs were plentiful among the troops.

“When you’re in a combat situation you have nothing to do but try to stay alive,” Romer said. “You don’t want your mind to overwhelm the things you’re going through but it can ... so you drink, you do drugs to get your mind off of what you’re doing.”

When he returned stateside, Romer dabbled in drugs and alcohol, but his downfall was gambling. When he lost his home, his family moved in with in-laws until he lost his government job. From there, he was on the streets and lived out of a car with his wife and 8-year-old son.

“At that point, that pride factor kicked in,” he said. “It’s a difficult thing to overcome because we feel we can do it on our own, we’re still men and we have the attitude that we can help our family.”

After a year and a half on the streets, a VA social worker convinced him to seek help with Carrfour Supportive Housing. Today, he is working on becoming a certified peer support specialist with Operation Sacred Trust.

But how to avoid homelessness altogether? Halyard thinks the Armed Forces have some work to do when it comes to returning soldiers, namely making veterans aware of the services that are available to them should they fall on hard times.

“There needs to be a more proactive approach with the state that these veterans are returning to,” he said. “If we had that in place, I guarantee you you would not see as much homelessness with veterans.”

