

The Miami Herald

November 11, 2012

Circulation: 160,505

VETERANS DAY

Step forward for homeless local vets

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The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have created a new generation of veterans — many of whom have returned only to encounter serious financial burdens



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as the nation's economy struggles to find its footing. For these heroes, the excitement of coming home has been marred by the reality that

they may suddenly be without a job and without a place to call home.

The veteran communities in Miami-Dade and Broward counties have been hit particularly hard by the economic downturn. All told, our area is home to more than 20,000 low income veterans — 1,000 of whom are now battling homelessness.

Complicating these hardships is South Florida's standing as the least affordable of the nation's 25 largest metropolitan areas, according to a

recent study by the Washington-based Center for Housing Policy and the Center for Neighborhood Technology in Chicago. The report found that households earning between \$25,444 and \$50,888 per year spend nearly three-fourths of their income on housing and transportation alone.

The harsh reality is that many of South Florida's veteran families fall within this income range or at levels below this threshold. At the same time, home costs in our region are gradually rising again.

Fortunately there is help on the way for our community's neediest veterans this Veterans Day, thanks to a new grant from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs that will be put to work at the local level.

With \$1 million in new support, a collaboration has been formed between four South Florida nonprofits — Carrfour Supportive Housing, PAIRS Foundation, Henderson Behavioral Health, and Neighborhood Housing Services of South Florida — with the goal of ending homelessness among at-risk veterans and their families. The initiative, called Operation Sacred Trust, provides housing assistance and supportive services for thousands of struggling veterans living in Miami-Dade and Broward counties.

Rather than competing for the same dollars, our organi-

zations have joined forces to create Operation Sacred Trust. It's a classic example of the whole being greater than the sum of its parts.

Ending homelessness among veterans goes far beyond finding a home; it requires ongoing outreach and supportive services such as employment assistance, health care, financial planning, transportation, and relationship counseling. Operation Sacred Trust also helps veterans who have fallen behind on their bills by providing limited payments to third parties such as landlords, utility companies, and child-care providers.

While the VA's federal funding will make a positive impact in the lives of hundreds of local families in need, there is significant work to be done. Unfortunately, this heightened need comes as funding from state and local sources falls to historically low levels.

With the cash-strapped public sector only equipped to do so much, the private sector has an opportunity to step up in support through volunteerism, individual donations, and corporate sponsorships. Consider it an opportunity to serve our veterans in recognition of their service to us.

Stephanie Berman-Eisenberg is president/CEO of Miami-based Carrfour Supportive Housing, a nonprofit affordable housing developer.