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Missouri a magnet for homeless veterans

By LEE HILL KAVANAUGH
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Dressed in the Army uniform he wore in the Persian Gulf War, John Vitale draws stares at food kitchens as he waits for a free meal.

He earned 18 medals, ribbons and awards in Iraq, and was honorably discharged. He wants strangers to know he's a veteran. He says he doesn't drink or use illegal drugs. He calls everyone "sir" or "ma'am."

But something about him isn't right.

His eyes dart, scanning for an unknown assailant. His hands shake. His moods swing wildly. He can't hold a job. For the last two years, Vitale, 40, has traveled in and out of homelessness.

According to a report released today by the National Alliance to End Homelessness, more than 195,000 U.S. veterans were homeless on any given night in 2006, and 495,400 were homeless at some point during the year.

The report ranks Missouri fourth in the nation for the highest percentage of its veterans who are homeless, behind the District of Columbia, Louisiana and California. Missouri had an estimated 4,800 homeless veterans in 2005, according to the report. Kansas had 620.

Among the theories for Missouri's high ranking: Veterans are drawn by lower housing costs and living expenses, as well as the availability of blue-collar jobs. Also, agencies that provide services in Missouri may be doing a better job of persuading clients to acknowledge they are veterans and receive aid from the federal government.

Veterans make up 11 percent of the 18-and-older population, the report said, but 26 percent of homeless people.

"It's horrific to me that (high percentage) of all of our homeless are veterans," said Cynthia Larcom, executive director of the Homeless Services Coalition of Greater Kansas City, which assists the homeless in five counties.

Larcom has run dozens of focus groups with homeless veterans, trying to determine why so many sleep on the street, in shelters or in places not fit for people.

Statistics collected by her agency and other service providers across the country provided the basis for the report.

"Veterans used to not want to tell you they were vets," she said. "Agencies short on funds would take the client out of their services" and send them to the Department of Veterans Affairs.

"Vets don't want to deal with the bureaucracy. One vet summed it up to me. He said: 'I'm not going to stand in a blue line to be referred to a red line, to be referred to a green line.' "

Kansas City's reStart Homeless Services Center welcomes anyone needing a place to sit, drink coffee, eat a doughnut — and feel safe for a few hours.

Mary Yount, reStart's site director, also looks for veterans among her clients because they can be "fast-tracked" into housing, she said.

She said there simply was not enough money being spent for mental-health services for the homeless, veterans or not.

"We'll get people connected to an appointment, but it'll be four weeks away. These guys don't have calendars. They lose track. They miss appointments. ... It's a vicious circle for them."

The doors of the Vietnam Veterans of America, 3027 Walnut St., are open to any veteran. Most veterans who walk in already have tried to find help.

But they have gotten lost in the tangle of paperwork and documents and applications the government requires from them to raise their benefit levels high enough to avoid homelessness. They are also suspicious of authority figures.

So, the "uniform" for J.D. Wright, a service officer at the Vietnam Veterans of America Heart of America chapter 317 includes a leather jacket, a political T-shirt and long hair tied in a ponytail. He looks more like an aging biker than someone who knows his way around the inner workings of the government's veteran-benefits system.

"Around here, a lot of guys have a suck-it-up attitude. This is the Midwest!" he said. "Many of them will file the initial paperwork but then they don't follow through, which can leave them literally out in the cold."

In St. Louis is the St. Patrick Center, the largest provider of homeless services in Missouri, serving more than 9,000 persons, veterans and others.

Chief Executive Officer Dan Buck has his own ideas about why Missouri is ranked so high.

"Missouri is the heart of the heartland," he said. We have large military bases either in Missouri or near us. And all the branches of services recruit here because our people sign up. Then, people usually return to the place they were raised.

"The transition of coming out of the military, where everything is provided to them from housing to food to transportation, and then coming back to civilian life, with bills, etc., is an adjustment. ... Plus, they're often dealing with mental health issues like post-traumatic stress."

Other reasons include housing. Unlike the coasts, he said, Missouri has affordable housing. And it has blue-collar jobs.

"The Midwest is conducive to the guy who wants to come here, start and raise a family," Buck said.

Buck said the number of homeless veterans "should break everybody's heart who hears it."

"We should all be offended that any of our veterans have to be homeless. Of course, they have issues, but we can control housing.

"For us not to have a strong system of support for these people who served our country, it's a crime."

On the Web

•National Alliance to End Homelessness: www.naeh.org

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