

# Turning No Veteran Away

Former homeless veteran Irvin Goodwin now provides homes, jobs and counsel to other homeless veterans.

For three years, Army veteran Irvin Goodwin slept on make-shift beds of sleeping bags and cardboard boxes behind apartment buildings, in parks, even behind a church before his life took a dramatic turn for the better.

One day in 1995 while standing in a food line, Goodwin was approached by the outreach team from the VA Palo Alto Health Care System's Menlo Park domiciliary program, who offered him substance abuse treatment and shelter through the Domiciliary Care for Homeless Veterans (DCHV) program.

After 25 years of drug and alcohol abuse and several short stints in prison, Goodwin was ready for a change. But like many homeless veterans, he was unaware of the services available to him through VA.

"If it hadn't been for people seeking out veterans, I would not be where I am today in life," said Goodwin.

VA's homeless veterans program recently marked 20 years of service to homeless veterans. After two decades of evolving to meet the needs of this special population, outreach is still the cornerstone of treatment for homeless veterans.

In fact, the majority of the homeless veterans who received services in

fiscal year 2006 were contacted through the Health Care for Homeless Veterans (HCHV) program outreach effort. Almost half (46.3 percent) of the veterans contacted through outreach (17,902) had not used any VA mental health services in the six months prior to outreach.

Goodwin completed the substance abuse treatment program at the Menlo Park Division of VA Palo

the Compensated Work Therapy (CWT) program. CWT programs offer vocational rehabilitation through supervised work contracted from private firms and public sector agencies, including VA.

In one year, Goodwin and his outreach partner made contact with 975 veterans in northern California. In one month, they went to 38 different homeless sites where veterans

lived. Goodwin used his success through the program as an example when encouraging other homeless veterans.

As a former homeless veteran himself, Goodwin understands the uniqueness of the situation for his fellow veterans.

"To help homeless veterans you have to have immediate services," said Goodwin. "Veterans are in dire need right there. Most are ready to make the decision to turn their life

around, but most services don't have the capacity to take them immediately."

That inspired Goodwin, with the help of like-minded friends, to begin opening homes (eight total) specifically designed to help homeless veterans return to the community. The veterans pay low rent while residing in houses that were offered to Goodwin by a friend's father—first



COURTESY OF IRVIN GOODWIN

*Irvin Goodwin started a facility offering transitional housing and supportive services to homeless veterans in an underused building on the VA Palo Alto Health Care System's Menlo Park campus.*

Alto and was successfully discharged from the DCHV program in 1996. He went on to obtain employment in the warehousing field and continued to attend substance abuse meetings and use VA services as a support system.

While at Menlo Park, Goodwin told other veterans about the program. He was so successful at reaching these veterans that in 1999 he joined the DCHV outreach team through

one, then three more. Once others heard of Goodwin's success with the veterans, they began donating houses to the cause.

While still conducting outreach through the DCHV program, Goodwin noticed that he would offer the services to veterans and a short time later he would see some of those same veterans back on the streets.

"I wished that I had a building to take vets off the street and immediately put them in a safe environment to receive treatment," recalled Goodwin. "I could make referrals to shelters, but if they were full, then the vet was still homeless."

With the support of VA Palo Alto Director Lisa Freeman, Chief of Domiciliary Tom Burling and Assis-

### ***"If it hadn't been for people seeking out veterans, I would not be where I am today in life."***

tant Domiciliary Chief Chris Condo, Goodwin ended his employment with VA, obtained nonprofit status, and presented them with a proposal to use an underused building on the campus of the Menlo Park Division to provide transitional housing and supportive services for homeless veterans. As with the houses in the community, Goodwin's idea caught fire and others donated their services to the cause.

The Housing Industry Foundation gave him \$140,000 worth of furniture. VA Palo Alto supplied 14 telephone and four fax lines, didn't charge for utilities, and gave him all the support he needed. Goodwin later applied, through his nonprofit organization, for funding under VA's Homeless Providers Grant and Per Diem program, and received \$458,000 for two years.

Under this program, VA offers grants to nonprofit organizations to help develop supportive housing programs and service centers. Since 1994, VA has offered grants and per diem-only support to help create more than 11,000 new community-based beds for homeless veterans.

Goodwin started in 2000 with 12,000 square feet of the building—enough space to house 60 veterans. Today, the Homeless Veterans Emergency Housing Facility occupies 32,000 square feet of the building and has brought more than 500 homeless veterans off the streets of northern California every year for the past seven years.

The program offers 35 beds for immediate drug and alcohol rehabilitation and other mental health issues. These veterans are linked with the HCHV program and other local VA treatment services. Twelve beds are for women veterans. One hundred twenty-one transitional housing beds fall under the homeless grant program.

Through Goodwin's program, veterans can participate in drug and alcohol relapse prevention classes, Bible study and life skills classes in one central location. Professional staff such as social workers and benefits counselors are on board. Veterans can also receive financial and debt services and low-income housing assistance.

Wanting to leave no stone unturned, Goodwin also conducts prison outreach. His policy is to turn no veteran away, so he even offers some veterans a spot on the sofa for the night until a bed becomes available. His program is so well known in the community that local police officers will often bring a homeless veteran to his program with the intent to help treat the veteran instead of taking them into custody. The Homeless Veterans Emergency Housing Facility has 16 staff members, 14 of whom are former homeless veterans who came through the HCHV and DCHV programs.

Goodwin recently added employment services to his continuum of care for homeless veterans. He is now

a federal contractor who works with VA's National Cemetery Administration to provide headstone engravings. Once again, all of his employees are previously homeless veterans who, through the homeless veterans services and Goodwin's persistence, are now productive members of society.

Providing housing to homeless veterans is an integral part of assisting these veterans, said Goodwin. That's why he believes the homeless grant program is so important. "A lot of programs wouldn't be in existence without this funding," he said. "Housing is the key—you have to get the veterans out of their homeless state. Once we can take them out of the homeless situation, the sky's the limit."

The HCHV program is in accord with community providers like Goodwin that housing homeless veterans is the springboard to success. VA's homeless residential treatment programs provide safe housing with continuous staff supervision, are designed to reinforce abstinence from substances, and provide on-site psychosocial counseling and ongoing case management.

Goodwin's is not the only success story to come out of VA's homeless veterans program. Many other former homeless veterans have successfully completed the homeless program with job skills, health and financial benefits, permanent housing and life-coping skills. In fact, since 1987, more than 400,000 veterans have benefited from the programs and services VA and its community and faith-based partners have provided.

"Irvin Goodwin's story serves as an inspiration to all of us who work with homeless veterans," said Pete Dougherty, director of the Homeless Programs Office in VA headquarters. "VA was able to provide resources and help show the way. Goodwin deserves all the credit in the world for using his success to help others." **VA**

*By Kenya Griffin*