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Homeless veterans need help from community

By Jane W. Burks and Claudia Blaylock

As we do every year, Volunteers of America will commemorate Veterans Day and honor those who served during war and peacetime. We will take time to celebrate their heroism and express our appreciation for their service. It's also an opportune moment to shine a light on the obstacles facing many veterans in our community.

According to the U.S Veterans Administration, more than 107,000 veterans are homeless on any given night in our country. In fact, one in six of all individuals who are homeless are veterans. Of those, more than 70 percent are facing addiction to substances, mental health issues or both.

Knowing so many of those who bravely served our country now face a life that includes homelessness, addiction and mental health problems, it's critical that we work together to comprehensively address their needs. At Volunteers of America, we see the real challenges facing the veterans we serve throughout the Bluegrass. We're dedicated to creating positive change in their lives.

We do this through two unique programs: the Homeless Veterans Transitional Treatment Program, offered in partnership with the VA Medical Center and the Kentucky Department of Veterans Affairs, and the Homeless Veterans Supportive Services Program for individuals living at St. James Phase II, the veterans' wing of St. James Place (a facility owned by the Foundation for Affordable Housing). These programs are shining examples of how our community is working together to provide lasting solutions to veterans who have been impacted by substance abuse and homelessness and who deserve a second chance.

Dave Holland, an Army Ranger who returned to civilian life struggling with addiction, arrived at Volunteers of America feeling lost and hopeless in 2006. He worked with one of our professional substance abuse counselors and began a program of recovery. Holland graduated from our program and went on to receive a college degree. He now works as a substance abuse counselor helping veterans who face the same hardships that he did.

Many like Dave Holland have graduated from our programs and now have successful careers, healthy relationships with their families, and stable housing, all while remaining clean and sober. We measure our program outcomes and are incredibly proud to share them. Of those who graduated from St. James Phase II last year, 100 percent are working full-time, while 83 percent have secured housing and demonstrate attitudes and behaviors associated with residential stability. At the Homeless Veterans Transitional Treatment Program, 83 percent of those who

graduated in 2009 were employed and/or in school unless they were receiving disability benefits.

We credit our professional clinical staff with a significant role in this success, but it's the program participants themselves — veterans who are drawing on the strength and determination that carried them through a tour of duty — who achieved these personal victories.

Now more than ever, veterans need the support of their friends and families; and they deserve the support of our community to help them successfully transition from a life of service to life as a civilian — and to do so clean and sober in safe, affordable housing.

We count on volunteers, donors and community partners to help us deliver these life-changing services. In honor of Veterans Day please consider joining Volunteers of America in our efforts to ensure they have opportunities to become stable and self-sufficient. Please contact us at (859) 254-3469 extension 224 to learn more about how you can create positive change in the lives of veterans and our community.

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