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# Homelessness haunts vets

## Nationwide 400,000 go without shelter each year

By EARL KELLY, Staff Writer

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At least 3,000 homeless veterans live in the Baltimore metropolitan area, which includes Anne Arundel County, according to social worker Patricia Lane, coordinator of homeless veterans programs at the Veterans Administration Hospital in Baltimore.

Ms. Lane said her program gets about 20 new clients each month, most of them vets from the Vietnam Era.

"Right now, Iraq and Afghanistan vets are so young, they have not exhausted their (private) resources," Ms. Lane said.

Ms. Lane said that veterans' homelessness is sometimes caused by delayed combat stress, but more often it afflicts veterans who suffered from depression and substance abuse even before they entered the military.

The military, especially during the Vietnam War era, did little to detect and treat mental health and substance abuse problems, Ms. Lane said, and society was not welcoming for those who had served in uniform.

Ms. Lane said her office helps vets deal with medical and housing problems, and whatever substance addictions they might have.

Any veteran who served for any length of time before late 1980 and was honorably discharged qualifies, Ms. Lane said, as does any vet with an honorable discharge who served two years of active duty after 1980.

Homelessness generally afflicts older veterans more than the young, said Mario Berninzoni, executive director of Arundel House of Hope, which coordinates with churches to run the Winter Relief Program for the homeless.

"It takes time to spiral down to homelessness," Mr. Berninzoni said. "It takes years and years to get to this point."

"We are going to see more of this issue," Mr. Berninzoni said. "This problem is just beginning, with all the veterans coming back from the Iraq and Afghanistan wars."

Homelessness, in general, is becoming such a problem that the Winter Relief Program has extended its operations by three weeks this winter, Mr. Berninzoni said, and will keep its doors open from Oct. 29, 2007, until April 13, 2009.

More than 40 local churches participate in the annual program, and starting a year ago, two churches now typically run shelters at a given time. The churches rotate every week, with residents moving from one church to another.

Another option for the homeless is The Light House Shelter on West Street in Annapolis. Becky Miller, spokesman for the shelter, said Light House provided housing and employment counseling for 145 people in 2006, the last year for which the numbers were available. Of the total, 30, or roughly 21 percent, were veterans.

Nationwide, veterans account for 23 percent of all homeless people, according to the National Coalition for Homeless Veterans. Forty-seven percent of homeless veterans served during the Vietnam Era, and 67 percent served in uniform for at least three years. Of all homeless vets, about one-third served in a combat zone.

The National Coalition and the U.S. Veterans Administration estimate that 200,000 veterans nationwide are homeless at any given time, and about 400,000 have no place to live during a calendar year.

About half of homeless veterans suffer from mental illness, and half have substance abuse problems, according to the VA's data.

Ms. Miller, of The Light House Shelter, said that homelessness is a growing problem, and not just for veterans. (The average worker in Anne Arundel County earns \$12.87 an hour, she said, while the fair market rent for a two-bedroom apartment requires a minimum pay of \$18.10 per hour.) There are an estimated 10,000 homeless children in the state, Ms. Miller said, and the average homeless child is 6 years old.

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For more information on  
homelessness in Anne Arundel  
County and the services of the Light  
House, please contact Marilyn Baker  
at 410-349-5056.