

A helping hand for veterans

HopeSource program helps veterans find housing

- By NICOLE KLAUSS staff writer
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U.S. Navy veteran Blu Earl is no stranger to living and sleeping in his truck.

He calls it living off the soil, another word for being homeless.

After arriving in Ellensburg on Oct. 1, Earl spent October, November and early December nights sleeping in his truck or at the local cold weather shelter.

“Bedding is what saves you,” he said about the nights he slept in his vehicle near Umtanum.

The veteran, 65, moved to town in search of a more affordable life.

“I was stable in Seattle, but they doubled my rent twice,” he said, adding that Ellensburg seemed affordable because he could walk everywhere.

Earl served in the U.S. Navy for seven years. He was stationed in San Diego and Treasure Island, San Francisco during his first two years. In 1972 he transferred to the ship USS Long Beach, where he finished his time. Now retired, he gets money from Social Security and a veteran’s pension, but has to keep track of every dollar he spends.

Earl stopped by the Kittitas County Veterans Coalition office for assistance with finding a place to live. He was directed to the county auditor, who then directed him to HopeSource.

“He told me there was a veterans service at HopeSource that could help me and I could go there,” Earl said.

On Dec. 5 Earl unlocked the door to a 250-square-foot home in Ellensburg. He unpacked his truck full of blankets, books and clothing. He planned to set up a futon, and to put extra insulation on the windows, but will leave a little bit of the window uncovered to allow sunlight into the home.

Earl’s success story is one made possible by HopeSource’s Support Services for Veterans Families (SSVF) program. HopeSource received the \$883,000 grant for the program in October 2014, and recently received a one-year renewal for it.

Connection

Chad Larson, a direct service provider with HopeSource, has worked hard to connect with local veterans in the first year of the program. Some likely have been more willing to trust and work with him since Larson is also a veteran.

“There are Vietnam vets that saw a lot of action,” Larson said. “A lot of times they won’t talk to anybody else unless there’s that rapport there, where someone knows what they went through and has been in those same situations.”

Larson was in the Marine Corps from 2004 to 2008, and deployed twice to Iraq during that time. He was a radio operator with an infantry unit. After he got out of the Marine Corps he used his GI Bill benefits and earned a degree in communication studies from Central Washington University.

HopeSource CEO Susan Grindle said Larson’s background has been helpful in getting the program off the ground.

“I think it’s been very helpful especially in the first year of the program to have a veteran who actually saw action and was there,” she said. “He was in the hot spots when they were hot spots.”

Program

The SSVF program is housing first, meaning people get housed before they get treatment or help with their other problems. The philosophy is that people can’t be productive or make change if they don’t have a stable place to go everyday. Housing first is a stipulation of the grant, but is also in line with HopeSource’s views, Grindle said.

“Once they’re housed we use that progressive engagement model in working with them to help identify barriers they have and providing them with resources to overcome the barriers,” said John Raymond, HopeSource chief operations officer and program planner.

The veterans are the ones doing the work, finding a house and making sure it's within budget. They then get that satisfaction of know they've done the work and made a big accomplishment.

"It's been a very rewarding program for us to have the opportunity to operate and we're very happy to do so," Raymond said.

Success

This year HopeSource will serve six counties: Kittitas, Grant, Chelan, Douglas, Okanogan and the newly added Adams County. There are four case managers working in the field with veterans.

Over the first year HopeSource served roughly 165 veterans in the five-county area, Raymond said.

"Most veterans we provided housing assistance to and most of the veterans were actually homeless, literally homeless, and we were able to provide them with housing," he said.

Challenges

One of the main challenges is that landlords aren't necessarily ready to rent to veterans.

"They know that they're difficult, they're homeless, they usually have issues anywhere from mental health, physical health, drug addiction, that kind of thing," Grindle said. "Chad's been able to get landlords to rent based on persistence, I believe."

There was one landlord in Wenatchee who said he'd never rent to a veteran. Larson kept going back to talk with him, and eventually he got one veteran in the building. Now there are three veterans renting from that landlord.

“He just keeps going back and talking with them, working with them and when he gets a vet in there he’s right alongside of them so if there’s any problems, he knows early and he can help the landlord address it,” Grindle said.

Another challenge was breaking ground in five counties. Even though there are multiple organizations working to serve veterans, most didn’t work together or didn’t know what each other were doing, Grindle said.

HopeSource held a quarterly meeting where all veterans service providers came together in one room and talked about what they offer. Grindle said she expects HopeSource’s efficiency will go up in the second year of the program now that the coordination piece has been established.

Outreach

While some veterans walk through HopeSource’s doors looking for help, others don’t know about the program.

Case managers actively look for veterans to help by going to the places where they might find homeless people: to the shelters, food banks, local grocery stores, under bridges and other places. They talk with law enforcement officers about encampment locations, put up posters about the services, and leave information with service providers.

“We are really happy with the performance of our team in the field and the effort and work that has gone into the outreach,” Raymond said.

Support

Once people graduate the 90-day program or the funds run out, they can continue working with their case manager for support or they can cut ties completely.

“When we can no longer support their apartment, the case manager can still work with them for as long as they need,” Grindle said. “There’s no limit for the amount of time they can stay connected with this vet.”

One man was literally homeless when he entered the program. He was ashamed of his situation and wasn’t talking to his family, but he received help from HopeSource, got his car fixed and worked up the courage to see his family. He now goes over there for barbecues all the time, Larson said, and he no longer receives assistance from HopeSource.

“The key that we push for is to get them to become to support themselves within a 90-day period,” Larson said. “To be able to be stably housed and find a job and be able to manage their finances, to get to a point where they can say, ‘You know what, I can take care of this. I don’t need you anymore.’”

In Earl’s case, he just needed simple help with paying a deposit. Now that he’s finally got a place to call his own, he’s planning for the future.

Earl has a degree in pre-law from Evergreen State College. He started working on it at Central in 1986, and finished it in 2010. He’s hoping to take discounted classes locally in four fields: 3D printing, legal research, grant writing and HTML. Eventually he wants to make his own website where he provides basic math lessons with step-by-step instructions. He also wants to be able to translate the problems and instructions into at least five other languages.