

Suffolk receives veteran support program grant

Originally published: November 10, 2013 11:28 PM

Updated: November 11, 2013 12:33 AM

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Photo credit: iStock | A file photo of an American flag.

Suffolk County advocates for homeless veterans are offering them housing help and other services after receiving a \$1.2 million grant from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs.

The federal Supportive Services for Veteran Families grant was awarded last month to the Patchogue-based Economic Opportunity Council of Suffolk Inc. to administer the program.

Qualified veterans can expect services that include personal financial planning, counsel on legal issues, financial assistance, day care, employment training assistance and peer support among other aid.

"We're using the housing first model, and we're going to assist low-income veterans who are at risk of homelessness or homeless," Suffolk program coordinator Robert O'Donnell said. He added that Long Island veterans have long been underrepresented in getting services.

First order of business is to get the veterans a place to stay, said Rich Dellasso, the outreach coordinator for the local program.

The program, which started Oct. 1, is open to Suffolk County veterans who have served in any branch, any conflict or any era. So far, six have been accepted into the program. Those with a dishonorable discharge are not eligible.

This is the first time that a Supportive Services grant for this population of veterans has been awarded to Long Island, officials said.

Each veteran is assigned a case manager to help them overcome the obstacles of being homeless and other issues.

O'Donnell said between 2007 and 2011 there were almost 90,000 veterans in Suffolk County. The Housing and Urban Development Annual Homeless Assessment Report said for those years, 7.7 percent of veterans in the state were homeless.

"People don't associate Long Island with veterans because there is no local [military] base," O'Donnell said. "So people don't think of it as a place where veterans would need a lot of services."

He said program coordinators are optimistic that once word gets out in the community about the services offered, veterans will start using them.

Anyone who knows a needy veteran can call the program at 631- 289-2601.

"Once this SSVF program becomes successful in Suffolk County, we will be able to have better access to other services for our veterans, i.e. mental health, which is drastically high among veterans as well as unemployment," O'Donnell said.