

New group works to house homeless veterans

Wants to find homes for 300 veterans in first year

[By Michael Ruiz](#)



Economic Opportunity Council of Suffolk wants to help veterans get back on their feet. Stock photo

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The Economic Opportunity Council of Suffolk, a nonprofit that offers a variety of social programs for low-income Long Islanders, launched its Supportive Services for Veteran Families program last month to place roofs over the heads of local homeless veterans.

There are several thousand homeless veterans in Suffolk County and the program's goal, according to project director Rob O'Donnell, is to house 300 of them in the first year. One month into the program, 21 homeless veterans have been screened for eligibility by O'Donnell's office, though none have yet been placed in homes.

The nonprofit helps a veteran find a place to live and pays for the first month's rent and security deposit.

"We provide short-term, intensive case management and temporary financial assistance for those who

qualify," O'Donnell said. That means making sure homeless veterans have access to all of the benefits allowed them by the offices of Veterans Affairs and social services, as well as helping them achieve self-sufficiency by ensuring they take proper medications, hold down jobs and transition back into civilian life.

"If they don't meet our criteria, we try to set them up with people who can help them," O'Donnell said. "We have relationships with other agencies."

A common roadblock for veterans struggling to return to civilian life is post-traumatic stress disorder, said Rich Dellasso, the service's outreach coordinator, who has spent much of his first month on the job reaching out to other agencies, nonprofits and veterans' organizations to both raise awareness of the benefits that are offered and to build working relationships between each group.

Veterans, Dellasso said, tend to want to get by independently, but confusing policies and protocol can get in their way.

"You might suffer from anxiety and it might be overwhelming to fill out all the paperwork," O'Donnell said. "Our case managers are kind of a shield against the bureaucracy."

The fledgling program currently has two case managers and is looking to hire a third, O'Donnell said. One is a veteran herself, with a deep knowledge of how to work with Veterans Affairs and the ability to connect with other vets on a peer-to-peer basis. The other is a seasoned social worker, who previously worked with HIV-positive patients and the underprivileged with mental health issues.

The small staff has an ambitious goal.

"We want to eradicate homelessness within the vets' community by 2015," O'Donnell said. "We want to house them first, and then wrap around the other problems. If they have substance abuse problems, we don't worry about that until they're in a house."

"No one should be homeless," Dellasso said. "Especially not if they served this country."