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Advocates work to end veteran homelessness

Local governments, nonprofits partner to end veteran homelessness

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Sitting in the courtyard of his apartment complex in Fort Collins, Veteran Bryan Tribby talks April 12 about his time being homeless and how it feels to have a place to call home. There is a collaborative effort between local nonprofits and government agencies to help house homeless veterans. (Jenny Sparks / Loveland Reporter-Herald)

The goals are lofty: start working with 140 homeless veterans in Larimer County and house at least 65 of them — in a 100-day period — and create a coordinated countywide system of resources for homeless people.

The goals are "very ambitious," and "very aggressive," but they push community leaders to try different things, said Vanessa Fenley, Homeward 2020 director.

Fenley's organization is heading the effort with other agencies in the community, nonprofits and local governments alike, to work toward goals that are part of a campaign by Gov. John Hickenlooper's office. Fenley said local leaders are working with federal and state agencies to help meet their communities' needs.

"We're fundamentally trying to change how people access housing in Larimer County," she said.

That federal and state support doesn't necessarily translate to additional money for efforts, at least not yet, Fenley said, but participating communities in the 100-day campaign are each receiving \$19,000 in technical support from the state.

The coordinated community efforts are part of a 2009 federal campaign calling for an end to veteran homelessness by end of 2015, Loveland Community Partnership Office administrator Alison Hade said.

Though that didn't happen, the administration gave communities a list of action items to take to move toward the goal — including coordinated access. Still, over a five-year-period, veteran homelessness decreased by more than 35 percent, and that's not insignificant, Hade said.

"It really takes community organizations and agencies working together to produce results," she said.

One of the challenges is finding homeless veterans so leaders can begin the assessments and start working with them in the first place, Hade said. Part of that is done through various homeless counts across the state; however, there's still not a good estimate of how many are in the county.

In addition to that effort, Loveland Mayor Cecil Gutierrez, a veteran himself, signed on to a mayors' challenge last month called by first lady Michelle Obama to end veterans' homelessness.

"As a city, we have been extremely supportive of our veterans and continue to be supportive of our veterans," Gutierrez said. "This is just an ability for us to bring this to the forefront once more."

The initiative is a start, he said, especially in creating awareness about the issue and the challenges that remain.

With a little more than 20 days left, the Larimer County project had assessed 76 homeless veterans and helped house 22 — four out-of-state and five in Weld County.

The first half of the campaign was slower than the second half, Fenley said, because the groups were still trying to get the infrastructure up and running.

Other partners include the Fort Collins and Loveland housing authorities, Larimer County government and nonprofits in the county that serve homeless populations. The infrastructure, Fenley said, will be able to help not just homeless veterans but all homeless individuals in the county.

From homelessness to advocacy

Bryan Tribby said he doesn't like to be in the spotlight — he's not fond of serving as the face of an issue, but when it comes to homelessness, he knows it has to be done.

But he said as an advocate, he tells people like it is.

"I'm not going to sugarcoat the reality of being homeless," he said.

Tribby, a Navy veteran, said in March of 2011, he began his journey of homelessness in Fort Collins that lasted until February 2013.

He had gotten sick, incurred large amounts of debt and couldn't find a job because he was having back problems.

"I basically ran out of money," he said.

He didn't have family in Fort Collins, and the family he had in Colorado wasn't in a position to help him. And, he said, he didn't want to be a burden on his family. So he took to the streets, spending many of his nights in his car — which didn't work for much of the time.

Tribby met a homeless couple in Fort Collins who, he said, helped him figure out what resources he had available.

For four months, he was able to seek shelter in Catholic Charities' homeless veterans program. He was able to get clothes from Mary's Closet in downtown Fort Collins and sought help from Homeless Gear — the nonprofit for which he currently serves on the board of directors.

He tried to do some manual labor in the summer months as he could find it and as his health allowed.

For Tribby, becoming homeless wasn't an easy transition.

"I'd been a productive member of society since I was 9," he said, adding that he'd been paying taxes since 1972. "I'd never been that poor, ever. I'd never been subject to abject poverty."

He wasn't exactly rich before, he said, taking care of his son as a single dad after serving in the military, but homelessness is another experience. Despite his struggles, he remained optimistic. He said he always knew he wouldn't be homeless forever, and that, along with his faith in God, kept him moving forward.

Tribby remembers one night that he spent in his car, after the car had broken down.

"The coldest night I spent outside, the next morning was the best morning," he said. "It'll stay with me forever — it was the most beautiful thing I've ever seen in my life."

It was minus-17 degrees that night, but when the sun came out that morning, Tribby said the condensation created a million little rainbows all over his windshield because of how cold it was in his car.

There were moments of terror as well, he said, recalling a time when he and some friends found out another friend who was drunk had been raped. There were fights and robberies and friends dying from the cold weather who were turned away from shelters because of being drunk.

After Tribby first became homeless, he was approached by Homeless Gear to serve on its board, he said. He was starting to become known as an advocate. But for six months, Tribby refused. He wasn't sure officials were ready for what he had to say.

Eventually, in 2012, he agreed, and has served on the board since. He also volunteers with Homeward 2020.

"My main value to (Homeless Gear) and Homeward 2020 is that I have been homeless," Tribby said.

His experiences, Tribby said, made him a lot more compassionate and understanding. He began to question the way certain issues and people are perceived in society on a deeper level and started looking for solutions, he said.

"I feel very blessed and grateful that I am no longer homeless," Tribby said. "I never want to be again."

Tribby was able to get a federal housing voucher through the Fort Collins Housing Authority and moved into an apartment in 2013. He's now studying to obtain his paralegal certification and plans to attend law school.

But it wasn't easy, he said. And the perception some people have that homeless people are lazy and don't work or don't want to is far from the truth, he cautions. While it may apply to a few individuals, the majority are there because of life circumstances and they want to get out of it. They just don't know how, he said.

The issue is broad, but Tribby believes the solutions are there.

"With all the churches in this country, there shouldn't be any homeless in America. With all the abandoned housing in this country, there shouldn't be any homeless in America," he said.

Tribby holds a lot of strong views about changes that need to be made within various systems, whether it's prisons, the Veterans Administration or other government departments. And he plans to continue his advocacy work.

"It's far cheaper to house a person than to keep them on the street," he said. "It's half as expensive as putting them in jail, which is our solution."

But he keeps a positive attitude about the future: "We can do this," he said.

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