

VETERANS, from page 1

younger veterans recently returned from Iraq or Afghanistan, the vast majority are 45 and older. Roughly a quarter said they'd been homeless for less than one year. Older veterans were becoming new to the streets.

John Means of Central City Concern's Homeless Veterans Reintegration Project says their employment program is seeing more and more clients who are new to the streets. Two years ago, Means says, most of their clients were veterans considered chronically homeless, and they'd see the same people come back multiple times.

"Over the last year, maybe year and a half, newer people have come in," Means says. "Now we're getting a lot of people (who are) six months, seven months, eight months homeless."

For Larry, a 48-year-old Marine Corps veteran who didn't want his last name used, construction work dried up. Then he was laid off from a factory job. He recently found work picking up trash at the waterfront for the Rose Festival, but he was fired when his employer ran a background check and found a 20-year-old felony assault conviction.

"Evidently there's a problem picking up trash at the Rose Festival for felons," Larry said. "It's never gotten in my way at all, but now with the economy the way it is, people are pickier."

That's the case all over, says Matt Burroughs, the Portland VA's director of homeless services. A crucial component of the VA's transitional lodging program is helping veterans secure an income, but now, Burroughs says, it's hard to send people to "even the lowest-grade job."

Larry has been staying at the Glisan Street Shelter for three months while he looks for other jobs. Though he cites the economy as his main predicament, he says there must be a reason veterans become homeless in such great numbers.

"There's something about being in the military," he says. "I don't know what it is."

David Boling, a tall, softspoken 62-year-old, served in Vietnam from 1969-74. He worked as a welder and a machinist for many years but retired after injuring his back in 1997. He's staying at the Glisan Street Shelter while he waits to move into an apartment in Vancouver.

Boling says he's had post-traumatic stress disorder and other mental health issues since returning from the war, but they became especially acute after he stopped working.

"I buried it for 30 years," he says. "It is coming back on me... it just came back in the last two years, all those memories." Boling is now on medication for bipolar disorder and sees a VA counselor for his PTSD.

Burroughs says many veterans find their situation changing as they age. They may retire, lose a spouse to death or divorce, or watch their children move out. With fewer distractions and a weaker support network, emotional trauma can seep to the surface.

Watching the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan has also been an aggravating factor for older veterans, says Dr. Jim Sardo, a clinical psychologist who manages PTSD and substance abuse treatment at the VA.

"As our Vietnam veterans are watching this war on TV look more and more like the war they were in, in terms of it being kind of an occupation against an insurgency, more and more of them are kind of getting triggered by that," Sardo says.

Several of the veterans in the VA's transitional lodging unit say PTSD contributed to their homelessness, according to Burroughs. Others may use drugs or alcohol to quell mental chaos, only

STAND DOWN

When: Wednesday June 3, 10 am-2 pm.

Where: Ambridge Event Center, 1333 NE MLK Jr. Blvd. In fareless square on the MAX; get off at Convention Center and walk three blocks north.

Questions: Call Melissa Bensink or John Means at Central City Concern, 503-226-7387.

to have substance abuse land them on the streets.

Fifty-four year old James Stevenson served domestically in the Marine Corps from 1972-74. He never saw combat, but he did pick up a hard drug habit while he was enlisted. Once he left the service, he went back to school and worked for a time, but he turned back to drugs several years later, and "it was a downhill spiral from there."

After prison time for robbery and 8 years on the streets in St. Louis, Stevenson came to Portland last year because his brother told him it would be a good place to get his life back together.

"(In Missouri) we don't have a lot of things like they have here," says Stevenson, who's staying in the Salvation Army's Harbor Light transitional shelter for veterans and taking classes in phlebotomy so he can find a job. "You get one shot and that's it,

whether you're a veteran or not."

The VA has a number of programs geared toward homeless veterans, though only one in four veterans on the streets has ever accessed them, according to the National Coalition for Homeless Veterans.

The Grant and Per Diem program pays outside organizations, such as the Salvation Army and Central City Concern, to provide case-managed transitional housing to about 150 veterans in the Portland area. For long-term housing, 70 people can use housing vouchers specifically for chronically homeless veterans, and three buildings run by the VA provide low-income housing for up to 83 veterans who would otherwise be homeless.

Most of those programs have waiting lists, which people can sometimes jump if they're judged to be extremely vulnerable. In the meantime, though, emergency shelters are packed, and some have been turned into transitional housing instead as the strategies for addressing homelessness shift.

"You don't want to put people in emergency shelter; you want to put them in permanent housing," Burroughs says. "But you need something in the interim to make that shift."

"A lot more people are ending up on the street as the (places) that used to be emergency shelter have changed," adds VA social worker Keith Scheff.

The VA's transitional lodging unit, where Burroughs spends most of his time, provides temporary emergency housing for 36 homeless veterans — most of whom are 50 and older — who've been discharged from inpatient psychiatric hospitals. They can stay for 45 days while social workers help them secure an income and find somewhere to live permanently.

But that last step depends mostly on

The annual Veterans Stand Down and Job Fair is a chance for Portland-area veterans to connect with services, employment opportunities and other veterans.

The event is free to all veterans and will include representatives from the Oregon Employment Department, private employers, legal services, medical services, vocational rehab and other resources.

Job seekers should bring resumes to share with employers.

outside stocks of affordable and case-managed housing, which has grown increasingly scarce.

"I find it's really difficult to get people in housing," Burroughs says. "There are bottlenecks to people moving on."

Burroughs says it usually takes about three months to find someone a spot in housing — twice as long as they're allowed to stay at the transitional housing unit. What happens in between?

"I don't sleep at night," Burroughs said.

Rick Stoller, who directs the Harbor Light shelter, has noticed the same effect. Veterans and their families can stay at Harbor Light, which is funded by the VA's Per Diem program, for up to nine months, but even that isn't always enough time.

"It's becoming increasingly difficult to find appropriate affordable housing for folks, because everyone's looking for it," Stoller says.

To relieve that problem, the VA could try to build more of its own housing, Burroughs says — maybe even train veterans to build it themselves — but that hasn't happened yet.

"They've been in the homeless business, but they don't really want to be in the housing business," he says.

Stevenson is a few months away from leaving Harbor Light. He wants to stay downtown, because it's the area he knows and he needs access to public transportation, but if there isn't space he might have to move out farther. He's looking forward to moving into his own place, but he knows there will be challenges.

"Once I move out, it'll be a lot more responsibility on me," Stevenson says. "It's like leaving your parents' home all over again."

The Last Summer Thought

By Kareem Ali

The intoxicating hatred
You kept for a distant cousin
Blooms,
Like a rose perishing in the
Winter sun.

Or the love of a fellow
Neighbor
That you captured
Like summer bees
Kept in mason jars
Buzzing against opaque glass.

The whispering of grandparents
Simmering in the honey
Of their strokes
Is a form of music.

Who knows
If the bouquet of memory
Is behind them.

The scream of corn
In dry fields
Is like the chatter
Of children
After play.

VETERANS HOMELESS ON A GIVEN NIGHT

In Portland:
2007: 108
2009: 192
(One-Night Street Count)

In Portland VA service area (including Vancouver):
2006: 1,790
2008: 2,042
(Veterans Affairs)

In Oregon: 3617 to 7,000
(Veteran's Affairs; Oregon Housing and Community Services Department)

In the U.S.: 128,600 to 195,000
(Veteran's Affairs, National Alliance to End Homelessness)

Even since January, Burroughs says he's seen many veterans who've lost their jobs or their homes, so he thinks the number who become homeless will continue to rise. But what about the next generation of veterans? Will they hit the streets in the same numbers as they come home, or 30 years down the line?

Coming home to a job shortage is a challenge, Burroughs says, but this administration is pushing funding for veterans that he hopes will take care of them before they reach a crisis point.

"I think we do a better job of prevention," Burroughs says. "We're building on years and years of past mistakes."

Dr. Sardo, the VA psychologist, says Iraq and Afghanistan veterans are prioritized for mental health services so they can get treatment before their issues become chronic. But what effect that will have is still uncertain.

"If we intervene early," Sardo asks, "will it make a difference? If we get them services in the field ... will we not have the kinds of problems and the rates of problems that we're having in our older veterans now?"

For the men outside the Glisan Street Shelter, just as important as services are the attitudes that come along with them. Many Vietnam-era veterans still sting from the reception they received as soldiers returning from a hugely unpopular war.

"You come back, and you're almost looked down upon," said Larry, the unemployed Marine Corps veteran. "They used to spit on us. They don't spit on you anymore, but (being a veteran) doesn't get you anywhere."

Tyrone Brown puts it more succinctly: "They're bringing them back with a hero's welcome (now). I didn't even get a motherfucking drumroll... They wonder why we're alcoholics. Come on."

Phil Ogle, 50, is a peacetime Marine Corps veteran who became homeless after his divorce three years ago and just started staying at the shelter. He worries that younger veterans could face the same resentment older ones did, and that would compound any problems they have.

"This was another unpopular war like Vietnam was, and they're coming back," Ogle says. "We should all do our part to welcome vets back, and maybe there won't be so many homeless vets."

Ogle says veterans should make the most of the VA system, which has sent him through drug treatment and will hopefully help him take classes in the fall. He wants to become a social worker.

"I can't wait to be doing something — to get to square one," Ogle says. "This is square one, actually. Square two, square three is getting a home."