

HEMCOMING, from page 3

veterans, they say, have serious mental illness, while 70 percent suffer from substance abuse problems. And about half of homeless veterans have criminal records, and homeless veterans are more likely to live outdoors, unsheltered and experience long-term, chronic homelessness, according to the Council.

"Each veteran (in the program) presents his own unique challenges," says Anderson. "A lot of them have really poor credit. A lot of them have evictions on their record. A lot have mental health issues that have prevented them from being comfortable getting inside and staying indoors."

According to the Portland VA Medical Center, which is responsible for administering the program in Portland and the surrounding region, as of June, it was providing case management to 447 veterans, 414 of whom had secured housing and were currently renting apartments with their vouchers.

Bobby Weinstock, housing consultant for Northwest Pilot Project, the Portland non-profit that provides housing services for seniors, says the fact that the legislation gave responsibility of the VASH program to the VA medical system was a mistake from the beginning.

"They basically gave the VA medical centers across the country responsibility for ending homelessness among veterans," Weinstock says. "And these are hospitals. These are medical centers; they didn't have any experience ending homelessness and operating programs to end homelessness."

Commissioner Fish says that after studying how the city and Home Forward administered its subsidized housing program, he found the local VASH numbers were falling short. Though Fish has no direct oversight of the federal program, in 2009 he arranged to bring members of his staff and a representative from Home Forward to the Portland VA medical center to meet with the medical director to discuss where improvements could be made.

The process of identifying and referring homeless veterans to the VASH program is where Fish feels there is the largest need for improvement.

"One of the challenges is that, while the housing authority administers the program, the success of the program depends on the ability of the Veterans Administration to match a veteran with a services they need and to help them obtain housing," says Fish. "We ask the VA to take on a significant amount of red tape and bureaucracy to

make referrals to the VASH program. At a time when everyone is stretched thin and working with fewer resources, that may not be the most efficient way to deliver this vital resource to vets in need."

Fish says the system could be improved by relying more on the city's existing resources.

"We need to tweak the model to give the VA networks greater flexibility to contract with non-profits to, in effect, do the function of linking people with services and housing," Fish says. "They have more experience and competency in this area. Rather than create a parallel bureaucracy at the VA, we ought to tap into the experience of our non-profit partners."

For some working within the social services system, waiting for the VA to act is frustrating.

"We don't get adequate referrals," says Riddle. "(We get) very slow, inadequate referrals."

Another problem that has plagued the program, according to Weinstock and others, is that the legislation does not include funding for other costs associated with moving, such as application fees, moving costs and utility-connect fees.

"If veteran doesn't have an income sufficient to cover those kinds of moving costs and up-front fees, they are going to

face a barrier to leasing up their VASH voucher," Weinstock says. "Those kinds of financial tools are critical to being able to successfully transition people from homelessness to housing."

Complicating the problem, staffing issues within the VA have further weakened the effectiveness of the VASH program in the Portland area.

Fish says that after bringing his delegation to the VA, the program's leadership was changed at the Portland VA Medical Center. But according to Dr.

Anderson and staff at the VA, high levels of turnover throughout the program and a slow hiring process are keeping the program from being fully staffed.

According to Weinstock, staffing seems to have been a problem since the early days of the program.

"Because the VA didn't have a lot of expertise in this area of ending homelessness, they were very slow to bring on staff and train the staff and set up the program that would be necessary to actually implement it," he said. "So, literally, for years the program was hardly operating."

This year, the VA opened the Community Resource and Referral Center in downtown Portland to serve as an accessible drop-in center where veterans can be matched to

needed services. Social workers, community partners and various program-specific service workers cycle through the clinic throughout the week.

Additionally, Portland is one of a handful of cities using a new pilot program to identify an especially vulnerable population of homeless veterans. The Assertive Community Treatment team specializes in identifying those homeless veterans who have severe mental illness and have withdrawn from the benefits system. According to Anderson, 50 VASH vouchers are reserved for that team.

"We've been slowly filing up that team," Anderson says. "It goes slower than what you would think as far as identifying those folks. It's not that they're not out there, it's that they don't always want to come to us."

In June, Congress approved the funding for 10,000 additional vouchers which, if approved by the Senate and President, would increase the total number of VASH vouchers to around 60,000. Early estimates by the National Coalition for Homeless Veterans suggested that nearly 90,000 vouchers might be needed.

And in a move that could help address one area in which the VASH program falls short, the VA announced in July that \$100 million in grants were made available to private non-profits and other community agencies providing services to homeless veterans.

Fish says he is encouraged by the progress that has been made in the VASH program and he commends both the VA and Portland's local non-profits.

"In 2009 it wasn't working very well, and in 2012 there is tremendous coordination," says Fish. "We can always do better, but we've taken a giant step forward."

Despite the improvements made to the VASH program, some say there remains room for improvement.

"I don't think that we've worked out the kinks in the relationship between the VA medical center and the housing authorities yet," Riddle says. "We've made progress, but there's a lot of room for improvement. We could be utilizing more of these vouchers much more quickly."

Weinstock agrees, but adds that there is a human side to inefficiency.

"Every month that one of these VASH vouchers goes unused, that's another, in the Portland area, \$700 floating away," he said. "More importantly, that's another homeless vet that has to be outside or in a shelter or in their car. That's the big moral problem."

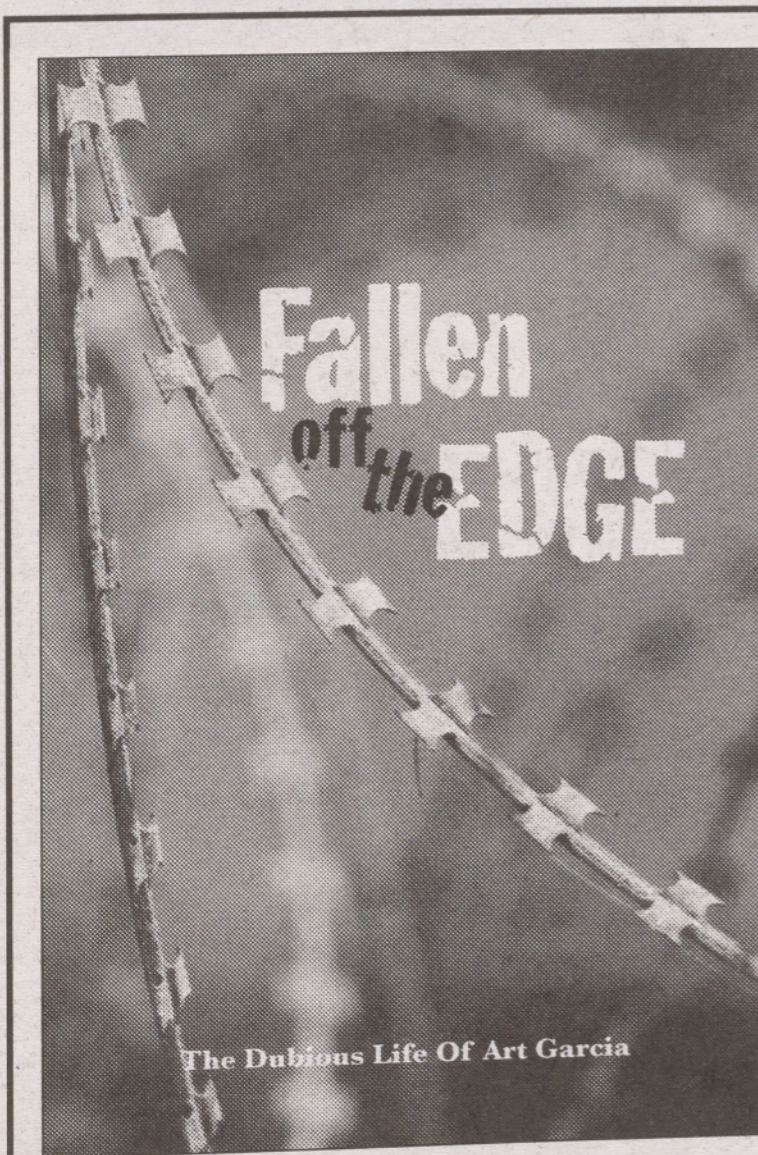
"I don't think that we've worked out the kinks in the relationship between the VA medical center and the housing authorities yet. We've made progress, but there's a lot of room for improvement. We could be utilizing more of these vouchers much more quickly."

— JILL RIDDLE
HOME FORWARD

Progress...

By Denney Earl

Searching for something one already possesses is an exercise in futility
An obsession that leads to madness grasping at the wind
It has been said "life is short" even though some days seem to last forever
The light at the end of the tunnel is not always a train bringing
swift destruction Sometimes it's a doorway into another dimension
a possibility to see things in a new light, a new experience to be
grasped and gleaned. Opportunities disguised as adversities
A challenge to embrace, a chance to move forward into a new day
Not to be ignored or squandered because "the lesson will be repeated
until it is learned" but once mastered another door opens and
intuitively, wide eyed I walk through not looking back to see if the
way through has been sealed Curiosity? No, but a hunger of a sort
The need to know as I am known. Searching, exploring, reaching,
trudging forward What lie's beyond the next door?
Knowledge? Faith? Destiny?



Fallen Off the Edge

A new book by Art Garcia

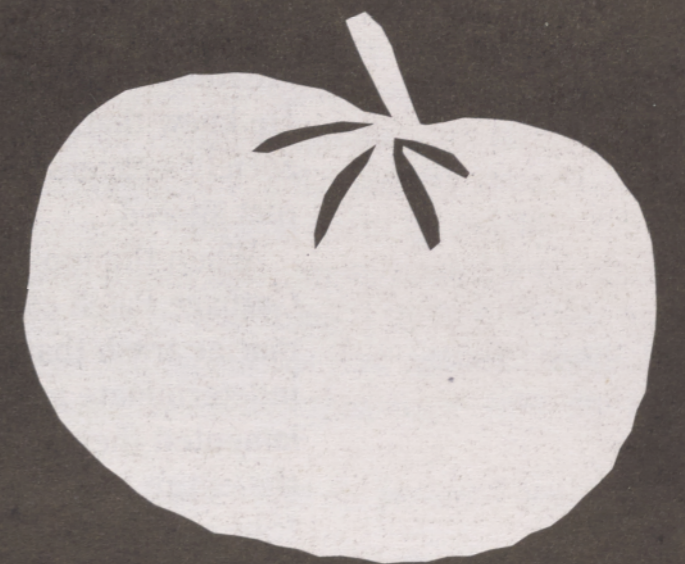
"Fallen Off the Edge" is a chronicle of one man's experiences after returning from the Vietnam War. Told through the eyes of Street Roots columnist Art Garcia, this book celebrates the major victories born from a series of questionable choices. Art's jocular storytelling takes the reader along with him in and out of the California prison system over the course of 10 years until he found the strength and courage to pull himself up from the fall.

The book is available online at www.blurb.com under searchword Art Garcia.

good. local. food.

ALBERTA
COOPERATIVE
GROCERY

1500 NE Alberta St.
Portland, OR 97211
503.287.4333
www.albertagrocery.coop
open to everyone 9 -10 daily



Vendors are regular contributors to Street Roots content, as columnist, poets and artists. Look for your favorite vendor's writings in each edition of the paper.