

Homeless veterans will benefit from House proposal

Lawmakers hope to raise state document filing fee to fund efforts to get veterans off the street

The Housing Alliance brings together advocates, local governments, housing authorities, community development corporations, environmentalists, service providers, business interests and all others dedicated to increasing the resources available to meet our housing needs to support a common statewide legislative and policy agenda. Alison McIntosh is a policy manager with Neighborhood Partnerships.

BY ALISON MCINTOSH
CONTRIBUTING COLUMNIST

The Housing Alliance believes everyone needs a safe, stable, and affordable place to call home. We believe that home is the foundation of opportunity; without a home, kids can't succeed in school and adults can't be stable at work or address barriers in their lives.

Today, too many Oregonians are without that safe, stable and affordable place to call home. In every community in our state, there are residents who struggle to make ends meet and are often forced to choose between paying rent and putting food on the table. Moreover, too many veterans who have served their country go without a home in Oregon. We owe a debt to these veterans — they sacrificed their time and put their bodies and minds in harm's way on our behalf. We cannot let them come back to Oregon only to have no place to call home.

Veterans are more likely than the rest of us to experience homelessness — and it's not just those who fought long ago during the Vietnam era. It is also increasingly men and women returning from conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan who've suffered unbelievable injuries and post-traumatic stress disorder. The average length of time between returning from the war and becoming homeless for these new veterans is now just three years. Medical issues, mental health concerns and an inability to find a decent paying job are all contributing factors. It's estimated that as many as 130,000 veterans experienced homelessness for all or part of the past year across the United States, and three times more are struggling with high rents and low incomes. One out of every three people who are experiencing homelessness and sleeping in a doorway, an alley or a cardboard box every night is a

veteran who has served this country.

The Housing Alliance believes it's unacceptable for anyone — a veteran, a family, an individual — to be forced to sleep outside, in a doorway or their car. We all need a place to call home.

The 2013 Oregon State Legislature is now in session, and the Housing Alliance has many proposals this year to remove the barriers people face in affording a place to live. One of those proposals is HB 2417, which would add \$5 to an existing document recording fee dedicated to funding affordable housing. The funds raised through this fee would specifically serve veterans who are experiencing homelessness or need assistance in affording a place to call home.

The proposal would address the continuum of housing needs — from homelessness to affordable housing to homeownership. It would help veterans who need a permanent place to call home with supportive services to address medical needs or mental health issues. It would assist veterans who need help affording an apartment after experiencing homelessness or prevent them from becoming homeless. It would help more veterans afford a place for themselves or their families. And for those ready to take the next step towards homeownership, it would help with down payment assistance.

Helping veterans find a place to call home matters to the Housing Alliance, just as it matters that we find a place for everyone to call home. In recent years, we've seen an effort at the federal level to address and end homelessness among veterans. The Secretary of the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, Eric Shinseki, has called for an end to homelessness among veterans by 2015. This has led to increased housing vouchers and resources for veterans. Funds

from the state of Oregon through this document recording fee increase will make federal funds go farther, easier to use, and more effective at this critical juncture.

Federal housing vouchers are a precious resource for a disabled veteran — they allow the veteran to find a place to rent and pay a portion of their income toward their rent. The government pays the balance, and the veteran lives in safe, stable, affordable, and permanent housing. However, this useful tool doesn't help a veteran with the costs associated with finding that apartment — it can't pay for an application fee or even a deposit. The good news is that this proposed increase in the document recording fee could pay these things. It could also help pay for a case manager to help veterans find apartments and ensure they remain stable in their housing.

Veterans in Oregon also have access to homeownership assistance through low interest, fixed-rate mortgages. A little bit of down payment assistance from the document recording fee funds would help more veterans gain access to homeownership for the first time.

Working together, the Housing Alliance believes we can solve not only the crisis of veteran homelessness, but also end homelessness for all Oregonians. Together, we can make sure we all have safe, stable places to call home and the opportunity it provides.

So help us — help us pass HB 2417, and help us as we work to address the housing crises in our communities. Join us in Salem on April 4 for Housing Opportunity Lobby Day, or call your Legislator and tell them to address the housing needs in our communities. Together we can solve these problems and make sure we all have access to opportunity.

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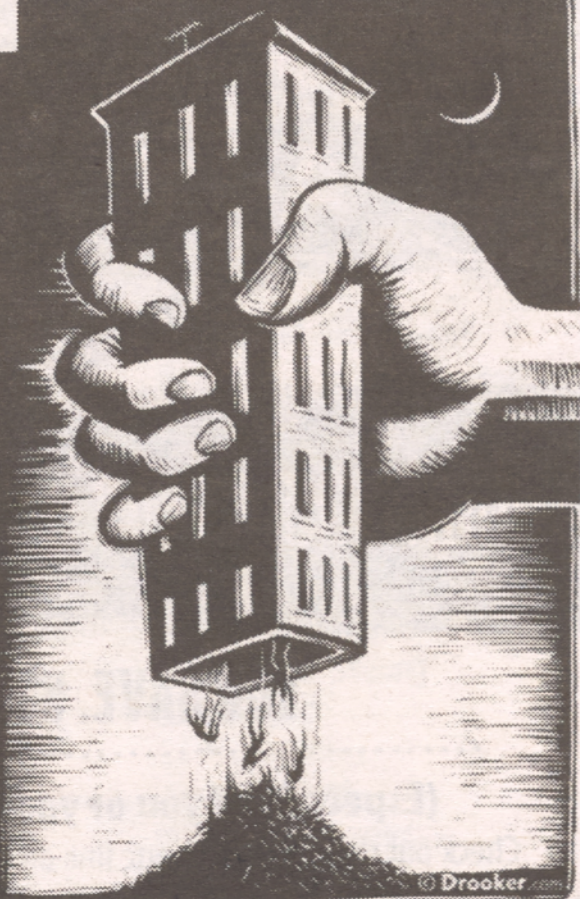


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The New York Times 2 April 2012.



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