

Vets

Continued from A1

“That’s where we’ll put the pigs because they smell,” he says. It’s part of the vision—pigs, service dogs, beehives, gardens, yoga, counselors, fishing trips and a place to call home.

“Americans account for 5 percent of the world’s population but 25 percent of the incarceration rate,” he says. And of those currently in Oregon’s state detention centers and prisons, 24 percent served in the armed forces at one time or another.

“I saw what it did for the low-risk inmates here. Having a sense of purpose and I used to tell them, if you want to get high, get high on life,” Buckwald said.

Approximately 20 volunteers came out to the remote camp on Saturday, April 1 to get their hands dirty tackling cobwebs, plumbing issues, leftover inmate materials and other remnants of the facility’s previous life.

“This is what we call a second call to action,” said Buckwald. The group advertised the work day on social media and had responses from all over Lane County.

Cottage Grove Mayor Jeff Gowing began work just before 10 a.m. hauling wheelbarrows full of debris and disposing of barrels full of forgotten fertilizer and rain water.

“Veterans need a place to transition back to reality,” he said.

Cottage Gove Planning Commissioner and current active duty member Alan Widener joined Gowing in the clean-up and noted that he had heard of the effort and wanted to lend a hand.

“It’s important to pay it forward,” he said.

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“If you do that, I can donate the batting.”

“I gather them up and cut them up and get the quilters to turn them into blankets.”

“I love that idea but absolutely, nothing that says inmate.”

It’s a spontaneous conversation that erupts when Buckwald finds Becky in the kitchen, scrubbing at the old stoves. He’s known her since his rookie days when she taught him everything he knows. But it’s when Molly Patterson interrupts the reunion that the impromptu organizing begins. She’s found a stockpile of old jeans and coats used for the facility’s prior tenants. She says they’ve never been worn and to throw them away would be a waste; thus the hurried conversation of batting and quilters.

“I just don’t want anything that says inmates. These aren’t inmates,” Buckwald says. The conversation illustrates the core of the Veteran Legacy’s efforts: still taking shape but with the intention to shepherd the camp from its past into the future.

Under the county’s control, up to 120 inmates could be housed at the camp in bunkbeds and communal showers.

“We don’t want to cram them in so the most we would do is probably 50,” Oberle says. The bunkbeds will be disposed of and custom beds with built in drawers will take their place.

“The veterans will have their own space and we want space for a service animal as well because it’s important,” Buckwald said.

The new bunks will also be getting more sunlight with correction-grade windows on the schedule to be replaced by bay windows and lockers will fall aside for individual, personalized spaces divided by cubby walls.

“It’s important that they have their own space and this be different from when the inmates were here,” Buckwald said. “When an inmate would be out in the yard at 2 a.m. someone would say, ‘Hey get back in bed.’ But here, sleeping is a problem for veterans with PTSD and if someone’s out at 2 a.m. there will be someone there to say, ‘Hey, let’s get some coffee, let’s sit and talk.’”

LEGACY

Veterans Legacy was awarded a five year lease with an option for five more and the hint of an opportunity to purchase the property from the county outright but not yet.

“None of us have ever done anything like this before,” Oberle said noting that the specifics of the day-to-day routine are still being settled.

Veterans may begin their day



Volunteers spent their Saturday cleaning and organizing the remnants of the former inmate camp in preparation of a new venture: housing veterans and helping them work through PTSD.



with calisthenics and then a group may cook, another may clean followed by time in the garden, reflection, counseling or building maintenance.

“Every moment will be for a purpose and sometimes that purpose will be recreation or rest or reflection,” Oberle said.

John LeBow is the president of the board of directors for Veterans Legacy. When researching different organizations that the group may be able to reach out to for help, he went to Veterans Affairs.

“They basically told me, no one is doing this,” he said, noting that there are residential programs and farming programs and counseling but to his knowledge, nothing that puts all of those aspects together.

“We would like for this to be the pride of Lane County,” he said. “And maybe even a prototype for the rest of the country.”

Completion of the camp is funding dependent, according to Oberle. Work days, he says, can clean up and repair the majority of the camp but the group will still need to hire staff to get it up and running.

“We’ve seen different numbers but there are anywhere from 30,000 to 38,000 veterans in Lane County and most of those are employed. If we could get just a percentage of those to become members, that’s our operating cost,” he said. Memberships in Veterans Legacy cost \$60 for an individual and \$100 for a family per year with the money going directly to the camp.

“Grant funding comes and goes,” LeBow said. “But if we can get this donation-based where it’s a yearly donation people make, we would be in a good place.”

Quilters, volunteers, donations need for veteran project

By Caitlyn May
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Molly Patterson is asking residents for help. After discovering several bags worth of old jeans and jackets that would otherwise be thrown away, she’s found a new use for them.

“We’ll turn them into quilts or teddy bears and then sell them and the profits will go to the camp or store the blankets and they can be used by the people here,” she said.

The jackets were part of a clean-up that took place in Veneta to ready an old county inmate camp into a transitional housing project for veterans. However, the jackets were stamped with the word inmate and organizers want to rid any trace of corrections from the property.

“We need someone to store the materials and to help break them down,” Patterson said.

The ‘inmate’ stamp will need to be removed from the jackets and both the jackets and jeans will need to be broken down to be used for quilting material.

Batting may be donated as well.

Anyone interested in joining Veteran’s Legacy to donate to the camp’s completion, or would be interested in storing material, donating batting, quilting or transporting the material, contact Mark Oberle at moberle@veteranslegacyoregon.com.



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