

# Shinseki: VA Tackles Root Causes of Homelessness

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By Donna Miles

**WASHINGTON, April 7, 2010** – No one who has ever served the United States in uniform should ever end up living on the street, Veterans Affairs Secretary Eric K. Shinseki insists.

So he's committed to ending homelessness among America's veterans within the next five years, and reports he's already seeing signs of progress through a plan that provides not just beds, but also services to address the root causes.

With increased funding in VA's fiscal 2011 budget request, Shinseki told American Forces Press Service, he's intent on expanding the homeless program to include more preventive services: education, jobs and health care.

"When I arrived [at VA], the homeless program primarily involved engaging the veterans that sleep on the streets and getting them to shelter," he said. "The deeper I dug into it, I realized it assured that we'd be dealing with homeless veterans forever, because [the system] is reactive. You wait to see who shows up on the street, you go out and try to encourage them to leave the streets and provide them safe shelter and warm meals."

To break that spiral, 85 percent of VA's budget request for the homeless program will go toward medical services to confront substance abuse, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, traumatic brain injury and other issues linked to homelessness.

"I looked at it as a funnel, and out of the bottom comes a homeless person," he said. "Well, in the funnel, there is the missed opportunity of education. ... It's the missed opportunity to have a job."

Shinseki is committed to ensuring veterans don't miss out on these opportunities and wind up in the "downward spiral" that too often leads to homelessness.

The new Post-9/11 GI Bill signed into law in June will make education more accessible for more veterans, he said, as well as a broad range of other VA-funded educational programs. Meanwhile, VA is working through the interagency process and with a host of other organizations to improve veterans' job opportunities.


Shinseki and Labor Secretary Hilda L. Solis co-chair an interagency task force committed to getting federal agencies to hire more veterans. VA, the Labor Department and the Small Business Administration also are encouraging more veteran-owned small businesses to compete for contracts, and helping to connect these business owners with other veterans.

"We know that veterans hire veterans. They know veterans, and they are comfortable with hiring veterans," Shinseki said. "So the idea is to get the churn going [and] to get more employment for veterans."

Early indications show progress since Shinseki announced his homeless initiative last fall, with homelessness among veterans dropping by about 18 percent from an estimated 131,000 to 107,000 homeless veterans today.

"This is a good start," Shinseki said, but he vowed to be the driving force behind a "full-court press to keep driving those numbers down."

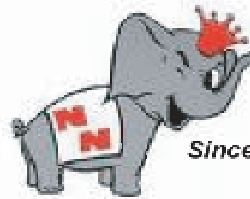
Anything less, he insisted, represents a failure of the system to provide the support its veterans deserve.

"This is not about reducing homelessness. This is ending veteran homelessness in five years," he said. "I don't have all the answers about how this will all happen, but a lot of people are committed to this and working to prevent ... this downward spiral." 



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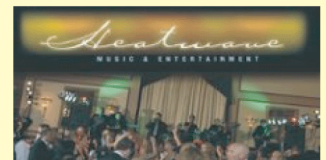
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