Homeless veterans get helping hand

Article by:  
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A police car slowed next to a panhandler Wednesday on a Minneapolis street. The panhandler dropped her sign asking for money.

"Just closing up shop," she said to the officer, her nervous smile revealing missing teeth.

But instead of ordering her to move along, the officer asked: "Did you serve your country?"

The question, the answer to which this time was "no," is part of a new police strategy begun this spring: to identify and help homeless military veterans, who account for about a quarter of the city's homeless, according to experts. A yes answer prompts the officer to hand out a backpack loaded with basic, donated living supplies -- a few toiletries, a change of clothes, new socks and a quilt -- along with information from the Minneapolis Veterans Affairs Medical Center on available programs.

"We don't expect to cure homelessness," said officer Adam Grobove, who helped launch the program.

"We just encourage them or give them some ideas about how to help themselves."

So far, police are trying the program as an experiment only in the Second Precinct, which includes the northeast and southeast parts of the city.

Homeless advocate Cathy ten Broeke said she only recently learned about the program and wants to see it spread beyond its pilot status to something citywide.

"I think a lot of people who are veterans don't realize they're eligible for benefits," said Ten Broeke, director of the Office to End Homelessness in Minneapolis and Hennepin County.

Homeless veteran Bill Hitchcock seemed a little stunned when police gave him a backpack on Wednesday when they caught him panhandling near the Minneapolis Farmers Market.

"Thanks," he said, shaking officer Adam Grobove's hand. "Thanks a lot!"

Hitchcock, an Air Force veteran who served from 1973 to 1976 at three bases in the United States, said he became homeless three years ago after he was laid off from his construction job.

Grobove said he's seen no change in the number of panhandlers in his 20 years of police patrols. He and his partner, Bruce Ketzner, think something as simple as a backpack might steer some vets to programs to get them off the street.

The backpacks don't cost taxpayers. The items
inside are donated by Quilts of Valor and Soldiers’ Angels, two national nonprofit groups that serve veterans. A group of volunteers in Northfield handmakes the quilts, Grobove said.

More federal help

Ten Broeke said a federal plan to end homelessness among veterans within five years has meant more federal housing vouchers are available locally. She said that if police can help vets understand that help is available, all the better.

"We are hopeful that homeless veterans are witnessed as a nonpartisan issue that people can get around. It's exciting," she said.

A Wilder Research group survey on Oct. 26, 2009, counted 4,000 people living in homeless shelters or transitional housing in Hennepin County. Wilder estimates that about 13,000 people are homeless statewide on any given night.

A police officer’s usual job with the homeless includes enforcing the city's aggressive-panhandling ordinance. It lists locations where panhandling is considered aggressive and thus illegal.

The list is so long that it essentially characterizes all panhandling as aggressive.

Wilder found that from December 2008 to November 2009, police arrested 1,234 homeless people in downtown Minneapolis.

Many homeless people have mental illnesses, including paranoia, and they distrust authority figures, said Mark Anderson, executive director of the Barbara Schneider Foundation, a Minneapolis nonprofit that works on mental health crisis issues.

"When someone's out living on the street, the police officer is the person telling them to move along, the person putting handcuffs on them and putting them in jail," said Anderson. "When that person reaches out with some help, it's really important."

Even the things inside the backpack, like the handmade quilt, deliver a hopeful message to a homeless vet, he said.

"Somebody spent the time to make this thing," he said. "It didn't just come from some factory."

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