

Opinion Exchange

STARTRIBUNE.COM/OPINION • SUNDAY, MAY 24, 2009 • SECTION OP

They served, but now are homeless

• We know how to help those who did their duty but now are struggling. It's just a matter of doing it.

By KIT HADLEY

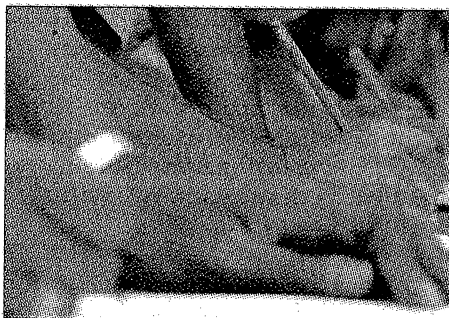
Across Minnesota this weekend, communities are taking the time to recognize members of our armed forces who have done their part to keep our country safe and free so that we all have the opportunity to enjoy life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

Unfortunately, a number of Minnesota's veterans face significant difficulties that make it difficult for them to have this opportunity. Last week, hundreds of homeless veterans and their families gathered at Fort Snelling for a StandDown, a one-stop shop for services and resources sponsored by the Minnesota Assistance Council for Veterans (MAC-V).

To raise awareness of this issue over the next couple of years, MAC-V, the Greater Minnesota Housing Fund and Heading Home Minnesota are sponsoring a state-wide tour of a powerful and transformative photo exhibit that reveals the bleak realities for many of Minnesota's homeless veterans.

It is tragic that anyone is homeless in our community, but unconscionable for people who have served their country to be.

The most recent Wilder Foundation study on homelessness reveals that Minnesota's homeless population includes people from all branches of the service. Almost two of three have served in the



Veterans filled out medical history forms at a StandDown event — a one-stop shop for services and resources — in 2003.

military for two or more years, and a third have served in a combat zone. More than 90 percent have completed high school, compared with 62 percent of the homeless population in general. But despite their service to the country and their generally higher education level, nearly half are chronically homeless.

It would be one thing if we did not know how to end homelessness among veterans. But we do.

Over the years, an unlikely partnership between the federal government and the National Alliance to End Homelessness has made gains in reforming the way we address homelessness. More than 850 communities and states — including six counties and five regions in Minnesota — have adopted plans based on real evidence of what works and what doesn't.

This initiative has been unusually bipartisan, with support from people such as former U.S. Rep. Jim Ramstad, Gov. Tim Pawlenty and Minnesota Senate Assistant Majority Leader Tarryl Clark. It recognizes that neither the public nor the private sector can solve the problem alone. And it focuses on the right goal: ending homelessness, not just managing it.

Supportive housing around Minnesota has dramatically reduced costs in the short term by providing easy access to mental health, rehabilitation and education services. These services are imperative to improving stability, health and productivity for veterans and others with long histories of homelessness.

We are proud of the progress Minnesota has made in reforming the system. Thousands of housing opportunities with supportive services have been created around the state. Progress has been made in reducing the burden to taxpayers by shifting from the repetitive use of costly services such as detox, jail, emergency rooms and in-patient hospitalizations to housing and programs that yield productive results.

We know helping our state's homeless veterans and others will take longer because of the economic downturn. But many people lately have admonished us to not let the opportunity of crisis pass us by. We must not miss our opportunity to continue the promising reforms in our homelessness response system.

We know we can end homelessness. But will we? When it comes to veterans who have done so much for the rest of us, how can the answer be no?