



SPECIAL PROJECTS

‘Vets Helping Vets’

Bay Area Nonprofit Is Safety Net for Veterans – Young and Old

By Frank O. Sotomayor

Michael Blecker, executive director of Swords to Plowshares (Swords) in San Francisco, doesn’t want to see a repeat of the tragedies that followed the Vietnam War.

“We can’t let what happened to the Vietnam generation happen to our young veterans” [of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan], Blecker said.

After the Vietnam War, tens of thousands of veterans had a tough time readjusting to civilian life. Some broke from their families and drifted to new areas; others succumbed to substance abuse or post-traumatic stress disorder. Many plunged through cracks in the social services safety net and crashed into homelessness.

Last year, using the approach of “vets helping vets,” Swords assisted 2,100 men and women at its half-dozen facilities in San Francisco and Oakland.

Founded in 1974 by a group of Vietnam veterans and VISTA volunteers, the organization provides direct services in four main program areas: supportive housing; health and social services; employment and training; and benefits advocacy.

In September 2008, Swords to Plowshares received a three-year, \$250,000 core operating support grant from TCWF to provide case management for health services; and legal, employment and advocacy services to homeless and at-risk veterans in San Francisco.

Frank A. Lalle, TCWF program director, believes that the organization meets an important community need for veterans. “We have veterans returning from two active wars who need services, and then there are veterans from previous wars who are still in need of help,” he said. “In fact, a really high proportion of homeless men in San Francisco are Vietnam veterans.”

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Most veterans are eligible for services from the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). But, as Lalle points out, the VA can be a difficult bureaucracy to navigate and veterans can miss out on available services. For those individuals, legal assistance is available at Swords to guide veterans in obtaining medical care, compensation for service-connected disabilities and education benefits.

At the Frontline Drop-in Center, which functions as a one-stop site focusing on critical issues such as mental health and substance abuse, homeless and at-risk veterans are assigned to a case manager to assess their needs and prioritize services.

“If an individual is in a state of crisis,” Blecker said, peer counselors work to help untangle the issue; if a person needs employment, Swords offers job training.

Swords also assists with a variety of needs such as getting a driver’s license, clearing up rent issues, securing military records, or referring veterans to health and counseling services.

“People are not widgets,” Blecker said in explaining how his staff tailors its services to the individual. “We help them negotiate their way.”

Larry Visakowitz, a Vietnam-era veteran, knows about some of Swords’ programs firsthand. He successfully completed the agency’s residential treatment program for his substance abuse problems. Today, he lives at Swords’ Veterans Academy, a housing and services complex for 102 veterans with disabilities. He enjoys being with other veterans.

“We support each other,” he said.

Blecker agrees and finds that getting homeless veterans into a stable housing environment, where they can have their medications, meals and counseling, is in effect also providing health care.

“They are going to be much healthier and will be able to live with dignity,” he said. 



grantee in focus

ASSESSING THE NEEDS OF FEMALE VETERANS

Swords to Plowshares wears two hats, as Executive Director Michael Blecker describes it. Swords provides direct services for veterans and, throughout its 36-year history, has also advocated for more responsive services from government and the community.

Looking ahead, one focus of Swords’ advocacy work is assessing how to better meet the needs of female veterans, who make up eight percent of the overall veteran population. In fact, U.S. Secretary of Veterans Affairs Eric Shinseki recently noted that the number of women veterans accessing health services is expected to double within 10 years.

Coordinating the effort for Swords is Starlyn Lara, a former Army staff sergeant who was wounded in Iraq. She is in the process of setting up focus groups to learn about women veterans’ pressing needs and future trends.

Since 1974, Swords has been a safety net for veterans seeking health and social services assistance. Iraq war veteran Starlyn Lara (above) works to address the needs of women vets.

