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For some vets, a home isn't waiting; More local veterans are returning to find they have no place to live and little help to remedy plight

BY CASSI FELDMAN

After 10 months of washing laundry and setting up showers in Iraq, Army reservist Wanda Borders couldn't wait to get back to the Bronx. She figured she'd stay with her grandmother for a few months until she found a place of her own.

But without a paycheck, landing an apartment in New York's tight rental market proved nearly impossible. For more than a year, she and her young children bounced among relatives' homes, often sleeping on couches or floors.

"It's very frustrating, not being able to support my family the way I would want to, depending on other people for everything," Borders said.

Borders is part of a small but troubling trend: Local veterans returning from Afghanistan and Iraq with no place to live and not enough support services to find a home.

Two years ago, Black Veterans for Social Justice, a Brooklyn-based agency, had seen only a few homeless vets from the War on Terror. Now it's logged approximately 60 with serious housing needs, at least six of whom spent time in homeless shelters.

"With Vietnam, you did not see homeless veterans during the conflict," said Ricky Singh, director of the agency's Homeless Veterans Reintegration Program. "What's alarming is the conflict is still in progress and you're already seeing reported cases of homelessness. This is something new."

Psychological stress

While the numbers probably reflect better outreach, Singh said, they also hint at trouble to come.

For one thing, he said, many soldiers are serving multiple terms with uncertain end dates, making it harder to hold onto a home. They also show early signs of psychological strain, a risk factor for homelessness. A 2004 survey found that one in six Iraq war vets suffered from depression, anxiety or post-traumatic stress disorder.

What's more, a vast number are economically vulnerable to start with. Data released this month by the National Priorities Project, a nonpartisan research group, shows that 2004 military enrollment in New York drew heavily from low-income areas like the South Bronx and East Harlem.

Upon return, some vets find that their military duties don't translate readily into civilian jobs. In New York City alone, the state Department of Labor reports that nearly 900 vets released from service in the past four years have applied for unemployment insurance.

"There's a set of economic and social conditions that push an 18-year-old to see the military as an opportunity to go to college and see the world," Singh said. "When you return home, the economic conditions that caused you to see it that way haven't changed. Your parents haven't gotten richer. And your room isn't there anymore."

Those who do crash with friends or relatives may still technically be "homeless," depending on the situation. The federal definition encompasses anyone who "lacks a fixed, regular and adequate nighttime residence."

Borders is a case in point. Long before she was deployed, she grappled with homelessness and spent 2 1/2 years in a shelter. She finally found a job at a clothing store - right before she was called for duty. A year later, when she came back from Iraq, the modest gains she'd made were lost.

"Everybody has the stickers on their cars: Support our troops," said Borders, 26. "Now that we're back home, they should do it."

Borders receives \$108 per month in disability benefits from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs for a back injury, but when it came to finding an apartment to rent, the agency was little help, she said.

When asked about housing assistance, VA officials point to the Home Loan Guaranty program that helps veterans secure mortgages without a down payment.

At the other end of the spectrum, the agency spends roughly \$100 million annually on homeless programs geared toward veterans in shelters or on the streets. Yet its housing commitment hasn't kept up with the need: Although the VA estimates that 193,000 veterans are homeless each night, its community-based housing program funds just 10,000 beds.

Pete Dougherty, director of Homeless Veterans Programs for the VA, acknowledges that low-cost housing would help prevent a surge in homelessness. But he considers that a job for the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. "We just don't have the legislative authority," he said.

In fact, the two agencies already have a program that provided rental vouchers and services for a small group of veterans, but HUD has funded no new vouchers since 2001 because of budget constraints. In March, the National Coalition for Homeless Veterans proposed a new HUD/VA housing program for low-income vets, but has yet to find a congressional sponsor.

Programs for vets

In the meantime, community organizations are left to plug the gap. Here in New York, Operation Truth, an advocacy group, and Common Ground Community, a local nonprofit, recently launched Hope for New Veterans, a housing and employment program. With funding from private foundations, they hope to house 60 veterans in the next 12 months.

"We're going to try to pre-empt veterans' struggles if they are in danger of becoming homeless," said J.B. White, a former Marine from Mississippi who runs the program. He said he was intrigued by the opportunity to help other soldiers navigate the transition to civilian life.

"My role will be something of a coach," he said. "Getting people to their appointments, doing the grassroots work. The VA is not going to do that."

Just ask Franklin Aguilar. When the Army combat engineer finished his two tours building bridges in Iraq, he counted on having \$11,000 in separation pay to start over. First order of business: A trip to Nicaragua, so his mother-in-law could see the grandchildren she had

never met. Then he wanted to buy a house in Louisiana or Tennessee and become a police officer. But when mistaken overpayments wiped out his separation pay and final paycheck, he ended up taking his wife and two children to live in one room of his parents' house in Sunset Park.

Desperate for help, Aguilar turned to Black Vets for Social Justice and was referred to Hope for New Veterans, as was Borders. Both were found eligible for three-month housing subsidies.

Borders has just found an apartment, not far from her grandmother's, to share with her 5-year-old, 4-year-old and newborn. Aguilar and his family have moved into a refurbished two-bedroom on Staten Island with bay windows and an above-ground pool. Both say they are thankful for the new digs, but worried about what will happen when the subsidies run out. Job hunts so far have been fruitless.

"I feel like half a man now that I've got my own apartment, but I'll feel like a real man when I can pay for it myself," Aguilar said. "I'm thinking about joining the Marines."

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