

# 2009 Veterans Needs Assessment



Middlesex United Way

Community Results Center  
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The Community Results Center (CRC) is a department of the United Way of Connecticut that seeks to improve community life by providing research and analysis that informs local planning, measures community change, and increases citizen decision-making capacity.

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**Middlesex United Way** conducted a needs assessment in order to understand the needs of the veteran population in Middlesex County. This needs assessment was made possible by the support of a state grant aimed at uncovering needs and challenges of the veteran population. This report focuses on general needs of veterans as well as the needs of veterans who are homeless. Data was gathered through interviews with representatives from national, state and local veteran's organizations as well as with health and human services agencies and community leaders and through publicly available data sources. Below, are some highlights from the report.

### Overview

Nationwide, there are over 23 million veterans comprising ten percent of the population. In Connecticut and Middlesex County, veterans comprise 11 percent of the population. In Connecticut, there are 245,000 veterans, while in Middlesex County, there are 14,000 veterans. Thus far, 12,000 Connecticut soldiers have been deployed to Iraq or Afghanistan. Among those, 43 soldiers have been killed. None of the soldiers killed was from Middlesex County. The number of soldiers wounded is not available at the state or county level.

Many providers of veteran services interviewed said that they would like to provide outreach to all veterans in the state; however, privacy laws prevent the release of contact information for active military and veterans. These providers would especially like to reach out to soldiers and veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan to welcome them home and to ensure they find needed support and resources.

### Homeless Veterans

Nationwide, there are approximately 154,000 homeless veterans. While veterans account for 10 percent of the total population, they comprise a third of the country's homeless population. The U.S. Veterans Administration reports a modest but steady increase in the number of Iraq and Afghanistan veterans who are either homeless or at risk for becoming homeless. In Connecticut, there were an estimated 3,000 to 3,300 homeless veterans in 2008, while in Middlesex County, sources report between 29 and 38 homeless veterans. The U.S. Veterans Administration Committee on Homeless Veterans says that the top priority for assisting homeless veterans needs to be the development of permanent housing which includes case management for those who need help maintaining their housing.

In Connecticut, the Veterans Administration (VA) funds 116 beds at 12 sites for homeless veterans. Each site has specific requirements regarding sobriety and the length of stay. Providers of veteran services suggest that there is an insufficient number of housing units available that accept disabled veterans and those with alcohol and substance abuse issues. The Connecticut Department of Veterans Affairs houses approximately 380 veterans at its residential facility in Rocky Hill. In Middlesex County, there are 5 shelter beds that are designated for veterans at the Mercy Housing Corporation's Shepherd House shelter in Middletown. Veterans may stay for a maximum of two years at the shelter. It was reported anecdotally that the beds are usually full.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### **Health Care**

In Connecticut, the VA provides health care for veterans at its facilities in West Haven and Newington. Nationally and in Connecticut, approximately 39 percent of veterans who have served in Iraq and Afghanistan have enrolled in VA Healthcare. A statewide veterans needs assessment reported a number of concerns related to the physical health of veterans who have returned from Iraq and Afghanistan including: dental problems, a high incidence of orthopedic problems; musculoskeletal problems; and traumatic brain injury. The statewide veterans needs assessment found that over 21 percent of soldiers who have returned from Iraq and Afghanistan meet the criteria for PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorders).

### **Employment**

The jobless rate for those who have served in the U.S. Armed Forces since September 2001 is higher than it is for nonveterans. At the end of 2008, the overall jobless rate for those who have served since 2001 was 7.3 percent compared to 5.6 percent for nonveterans. Employment agencies that offer job finding assistance to veterans say that veterans often need assistance transitioning from the military to the civilian workforce and can have difficulty maintaining civilian positions.

### **Transportation**

Transportation challenges exist for veterans traveling to the VA facilities in Newington or West Haven, especially for older veterans or those who are disabled. Although there are several options for transportation available, some are cost prohibitive and/or require a lengthy amount of travel. Often veterans have to be transported to a shuttle service in Newington that will take them to the West Haven facility.

### **Challenges for Recent Veterans**

Providers of veteran services say that veterans are not always aware of the benefits and services available to them. While soldiers leaving the military undergo an exit interview where benefits and supports are outlined, these interviews are not done uniformly and may not be done at a time when information can be best absorbed.

Women serving in Iraq and Afghanistan are more likely to have been close to combat than in other periods of combat in the past. It has been reported that women serving in Iraq and Afghanistan have also experienced sexual harassment or assault to a larger degree than in previous wartime periods. Families of combat soldiers also need support throughout the deployment cycle, especially for families with young children.

### **Community Ideas**

Veterans interviewed offered suggestions for enhancing local support for veterans. The ideas include: designating a veteran point person in each town to help veterans find resources and creating a regional veterans intercommunity counsel where all elements of the community including schools, police, chambers of commerce, universities, non profits and funding agencies can learn about the challenges soldiers and family members face during wartime.

**Middlesex United Way** conducted a needs assessment to understand the needs of the veteran population in Middlesex County and the adequacy of the supports available to serve that population. This report focuses on general needs of veterans as well as the needs of veterans who are homeless. The needs assessment was completed by the Community Results Center (CRC) of the United Way of Connecticut. Data was gathered through interviews with representatives of federal, state and local veteran's organizations, health and human services agencies, and community leaders. Data was also gathered from publicly available data sources on the numbers of veterans and the numbers of homeless veterans in Middlesex County.

Veterans comprise approximately 11 percent of the population age 18 and older in Middlesex County. These veterans include those who have served during wartime and peacetime from World War II to the current conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. They include those who served in all branches of the military as well as in the Connecticut National Guard. This research sought to ascertain whether veterans are able to access the supports that are available to them, whether there are adequate housing options for homeless veterans and whether soldiers returning from Iraq and Afghanistan require any additional supports.

While limited data exists on the veteran population and on the numbers of those currently serving in or returning from Iraq and Afghanistan, this report gathered as much information as possible at the state and county level. Data from a recently completed statewide needs assessment on soldiers returning from Iraq and Afghanistan is also included in this report. Data on the numbers of homeless veterans is highlighted given the current proposal by the Middlesex United Way Veteran Steering Committee to develop permanent supportive housing for veterans in the County.

In addition to the need for housing and assistance for homeless veterans, the veterans and providers of veteran services who were interviewed also focused on several other challenges including health care, employment, transportation and challenges specific to recent veterans who are returning to civilian life. This report addresses those challenges and also includes suggestions offered by veterans and providers of veteran services on ways communities can assist veterans.





### Data Challenges

#### *General Data on Veterans*

Understanding the numbers and characteristics of veterans and those on active military duty who live in Middlesex County is key to understanding the needs these veterans may have and the impact those needs may have on local services. It would be preferable to know the number of veterans and those in active service by town of residence, as well as by their age and gender. While some county and state data is available, limited information is available for each town.

#### *Data on Military Personnel Serving in Iraq and Afghanistan*

Current privacy laws limit the information available on soldiers who are serving in Iraq or Afghanistan. Information on the number of soldiers from Middlesex County who are currently serving and when these soldiers will return home is not universally available. The Department of Defense will alert the local American Legion that a soldier is returning home only if the soldier permits the release of his or her name. Representatives of local American Legion posts suggest it would be helpful to know in advance when a soldier will return home and if they will need assistance upon their return.

The lack of available data on veterans is of concern to a number of entities:

- Connecticut Governor M. Jodi Rell and Senator Christopher Dodd have requested that the Department of Defense allow easier access to the identification of veterans. Privacy laws passed in 1974 prohibit the release of personal information without written permission.
- The Connecticut Department of Veterans Affairs initiated Operation Outreach to offer support to any soldier who has returned to Connecticut and is recovering from injuries received in Iraq or Afghanistan. Operation Outreach seeks to find wounded soldiers through newspaper articles, word-of-mouth and any other source in order to offer assistance to the soldiers and to their families. Unless veterans identify themselves, the state does not know where they are and is unable to alert them to available services.
- Towns often only know if a person is a veteran if they file for their veteran property tax benefit.

Veterans in several municipalities in Middlesex County maintain contact with soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan for the purpose of offering support and also to find out about discharge schedules. This allows towns to also offer support when soldiers return home.

### Veteran Data

#### *United States*

In 2008, the U.S. Veterans Administration estimated that there are over 23 million veterans nationwide comprising ten percent of the U.S. population that is age 18 and older. A third of veterans are from the Vietnam era (Table 1).

**Table 1 – U.S. Veteran Population by Period of Service**

Period of Service	Percent of Veteran Population
Gulf War 2001 and later	7.8%
Gulf War 1990 to 2001	14.9%
Vietnam era veterans	33.7%
Korean War veterans	13.1%
World War II veterans	12.8%

Source: U.S. American Community Survey, 2007

Data on those serving in Iraq and Afghanistan indicates:

- Over 1.6 million service members have been deployed in Iraq and Afghanistan.
- Over 4,000 American soldiers have died in the Iraq conflict and over 640 have died in Afghanistan.
- Over 33,000 service members have been wounded since the start of the conflicts.
- Thirty-eight percent of the fighting forces are comprised of National Guard and Reserve members.
- Soldiers serving in Iraq and Afghanistan are older than those who have served in other American wars. On average, Vietnam soldiers were 19 years of age and WWII soldiers were 26, while the average age of today's soldier is 33 years of age.

### **Connecticut**

In 2008, the U.S. Veterans Administration estimated that there are 245,643 veterans in Connecticut comprising nine percent of the population that is 18 and older. These veterans have served from World War II to the current conflicts (Table 2):

**Table 2 – Connecticut Veteran Population by Period of Service**

Period of Service	Percent of Veteran Population
Gulf War 2001 and later	4.6%
Gulf War 1990 to 2001	9.3%
Vietnam era veterans	33.1%
Korean War veterans	14.3%
World War II veterans	16.5%

Source: U.S. American Community Survey, 2007

Data on those serving in Iraq and Afghanistan indicates:

- Twelve thousand Connecticut soldiers have been deployed to Iraq or Afghanistan. Of these soldiers 4,500 or 38 percent were members of the reserves or National Guard.
- Forty-three soldiers from Connecticut have been killed in Iraq or Afghanistan; none were from Middlesex County.
- Data on the number of Connecticut soldiers wounded in Iraq or Afghanistan is not available.

### *Middlesex County*

U.S. Veterans Administration data for Middlesex County indicates that there were approximately 14,000 veterans in the County in 2008 (Table 3). Veterans comprise approximately 11 percent of the population of those 18 and older. VA estimates through fiscal year 2012 show an average decline in the veteran population of 2.3 percent per year. Nationwide, the veteran population is declining 1.7 percent per year. The decline is due to the deaths of older veterans and the relatively smaller size of the military.

**Table 3 – Veteran Population, Age and Gender for Middlesex County  
2008 through 2012, Numbers and Percent of Veteran Population**

	<b>FY 2008</b>	<b>FY 2009</b>	<b>FY 2010</b>	<b>FY 2011</b>	<b>FY 2012</b>
<b>All Veterans</b>	14,032	13,744	13,435	13,110	12,779
<b>Males</b>	12,949 (92.3%)	12,635 (91.9%)	12,317 (91.7%)	11,995 (91.5%)	11,668 (91.3%)
<b>Females</b>	1,084 (7.7%)	1,108 (8.1%)	1,118 (8.3%)	1,116 (8.5%)	1,111 (8.7%)
<b>Age 17-44</b>	1,850 (13.2%)	1,789 (13.0%)	1,728 (12.9%)	1,666 (12.7%)	1,607 (12.6%)
<b>Age 45-64</b>	5,800 (41.3%)	5,559 (40.4%)	5,272 (39.2%)	4,865 (37.1%)	4,512 (35.3%)
<b>Age 65-84</b>	5,294 (37.7%)	5,275 (38.4%)	5,293 (39.4%)	5,427 (41.4%)	5,502 (43.1%)
<b>Age 85+</b>	1,088 (7.8%)	1,121 (8.2%)	1,141 (8.5%)	1,152 (8.8%)	1,159 (9.1%)

Source: U.S. Veterans Administration

- In 2008, Veterans Administration data indicates that close to 93 percent of the veteran population is male.
- Close to half of the veteran population is age 65 and older, and just over 13 percent is age 17 to 44.
- 2000 U.S. Census data reports that the number of veterans by their conflict or service era (Table 4). In 2000, 36 percent of veterans were from the Vietnam War era, 18 percent were from the Korean War and 27 percent were World War II veterans.
- Data on the number of soldiers currently serving in Iraq and Afghanistan is not available.

**Table 4 – Veteran Population by Era for Middlesex County, 2000**  
**Number and Percent of Veteran Population**

	<b>Middlesex County</b>
<b>Persian Gulf 1990+</b>	865 (5.9%)
<b>1975 to 1990</b>	1,839 (12.5%)
<b>Vietnam Era</b>	5,338 (36.3%)
<b>Korean War</b>	2,720 (18.5%)
<b>World War II</b>	3,906 (26.6%)
<b>Total</b>	14,688

Source: 2000 U.S. Census

Estimates of the homeless veteran population at the national, state and county levels vary. At the national level, more detailed information is available on the demographics of homeless veterans. Although this information may or may not be applicable at the state and county levels, it does provide a basis for understanding the homeless veteran population and is therefore included here.

### **United States**

Nationwide, the U.S. Veteran's Administration (VA) estimates that approximately 154,000 veterans are homeless on any given night and as many as twice that number experience homelessness at some point during the course of a year.<sup>1</sup> The federal government says that while veterans account for 10 percent of the total population, they make up about a third of the country's homeless population. Government reports suggest that there are many other veterans who are considered near homeless or at risk due to poverty, lack of support from family and friends, and poor living conditions in hotels or in substandard housing. The VA offers these characteristics of homeless veterans:<sup>2</sup>

- Almost all homeless veterans are male; three percent are women.
- Most homeless veterans are single, and most come from poor, disadvantaged backgrounds.
- Homeless veterans tend to be older and more educated than homeless non-veterans.
- Close to 45 percent of homeless veterans suffer from mental illness, similar to the general population of homeless adult males.
- Just over 70 percent of homeless veterans have alcohol or other substance abuse problems.
- Approximately 56 percent of homeless veterans are African American or Hispanic.
- The VA estimates that there are more Vietnam era veterans who are homeless than who died during that war.

While the number of homeless veterans has decreased by 40 percent since 2003, there is concern that the numbers will increase as military personnel begin returning from Iraq and Afghanistan. The U.S. Veterans Administration Committee on Homeless Veterans says there continues to be a modest but steady increase in the number of veterans who have served in Iraq or Afghanistan who are either homeless or at risk for becoming homeless. The committee has found that outreach programs have identified 1,800 Iraq or Afghanistan veterans in need of housing. The committee sites the various challenges in transitioning from positions held in the military to positions held in the civilian workforce as putting veterans at risk for employment difficulties and consequently, at risk for homelessness.<sup>3</sup> It also sites the mental and physical impact of war and the subsequent challenges some soldiers have in reentering civilian life.

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<sup>1</sup> U.S. Veterans Administration, *Community Homelessness Assessment, Local Education and Networking Group (CHALENG) for Veterans, The Fourteenth Annual Progress Report on Public Law 105-114 Services for Homeless Veterans Assessment and Coordination*, February 28, 2008.

<sup>2</sup> U.S. Veterans Administration, Overview of Homelessness, retrieved on March 17, 2009 from <http://www1.va.gov/homeless/page.cfm?pg=1>.

<sup>3</sup> U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, *Annual Report of the Advisory Committee on Homeless Veterans*, 2008.

## Connecticut

In Connecticut, there are various estimates of the homeless veteran population:

- The Veterans Administration estimates that there are 3,000 homeless veterans, with 895 of those veterans characterized as chronically homeless (chronic homelessness is defined as a person who has been continually homeless for a year or more and has a disability, or has been homeless four times in the past three years).<sup>4</sup>
- The Connecticut Coalition to End Homelessness (CCEH) holds an annual homeless count to determine the number of homeless in each municipality. CCEH estimates that there are approximately 3,300 homeless veterans in Connecticut. In its 2008 Point-in-Time Homeless Count, CCEH found just over 400 homeless people who identified themselves as veterans on the day of the count. On that day 15 percent of sheltered single adults and 9 percent of unsheltered single adults said they had served in the military (Table 5).<sup>5</sup> CCEH estimates that overall, there are approximately 9,000 people who are homeless in Connecticut (veterans and civilians). It is expected that this underestimates the homeless veteran population.
- The Errera Community Care Center, operated by the VA in West Haven, estimates that the homeless veteran population is between 3,500 and 4,000. The center reports seeing between 35 and 50 new homeless veterans per month.
- The Connecticut Department of Veterans Affairs sponsors an annual Stand Down for homeless and needy veterans. A Stand Down is an effort to provide services to homeless veterans. This day-long event provides services to homeless Veterans that include food, shelter, clothing, health screenings, VA and Social Security benefits counseling, and referrals to other services, such as housing, employment and substance abuse treatment. In 2008, close to 1,000 veterans attended the Stand Down where they had access to information and services.

**Table 5 – Point-in –Time Homeless Count  
Veterans in Connecticut, 2007 and 2008**

		<b>2007 Military Homeless</b>	<b>2007 All Homeless</b>	<b>2008 Military Homeless</b>	<b>2008 All Homeless</b>
<b>Sheltered</b>	<b>Single Adults</b>	315 (15%)	2,115	349 (15%)	2,257
	<b>Adults in Families</b>	13 (3%)	446	21(4%)	474
<b>Unsheltered</b>	<b>Single Adults</b>	95 (13%)	707	54 (9%)	590
	<b>Adults in Families</b>	3 (8%)	38	--	8

-- no cases

Source: CT Counts 2007 and 2008 Point -in-Time Homeless Count

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Connecticut Coalition to End Homelessness, Connecticut Counts 2008, Point-in-Time Homeless Count, July 2008.

## Middlesex County

In Middlesex County, estimates of the homeless veteran population include:

- The Connecticut Department of Social Services funds the Eddy Shelter and the American Red Cross Shelter in Middlesex County. In 2007 and 2008, DSS reported that 29 and 26 veterans respectively, were served by those shelters.
- In 2008, the Connecticut HMIS (Homeless Management Information System) reported that 38 clients who identified themselves as veterans received homeless services in Middlesex County. Those veterans were mostly male, had a long term disability and have been chronically homeless (Table 6).
- In 2008, the Connecticut Coalition to End Homelessness annual Point-in-Time homeless count, found nine people who were homeless who indicated that they had served in the military (Table 7). Since not all of the homeless found during the count are interviewed, it is expected that this underestimates the homeless veteran population. An advocate for homeless veterans suggests that there are veterans who are difficult to count because they sometimes live in remote wooded areas.

**Table 6 – CT HMIS Data on Homeless Clients Served, with Military Background in 2008**

	Number of veterans
<b>Ethnicity</b>	
Hispanic/Latino	3
Black or African American	12
White	25
Other	1
<b>Gender</b>	
Female	3
Male	35
<b>Disability of Long Duration</b>	22
<b>Chronically homeless</b>	14
<b>Primary Reason for homelessness</b>	
Substance Abuse	7
Legal Eviction (DSS)	6
Left Voluntarily (DSS)	5
Family Breakup (DSS)	4
Family/Friend Eviction (DSS)	3
Lack of income	3
Divorced/Separated	2
Health/Safety	1
Mental Health	1
Out of jail/prison (DSS)	1
Underemployment/low income	1

Source: CT HMIS

**Table 7 – Point-in –Time Homeless Count  
Veterans in Middlesex County, 2007 and 2008**

	<b>2007 Military Homeless</b>	<b>2007 All Homeless</b>	<b>2008 Military Homeless</b>	<b>2008 All Homeless</b>
<b>2008 Count - Served in the Military</b>	8 (7%)	1 (3%)	--	--
<b>Total homeless 2008</b>	115	25	82	3
<b>2007 Count - Served in the Military</b>	11 (9%)	--	3 (4%)	--
<b>Total homeless 2007</b>	125	29	81	12

-- no cases

Source: CT Counts 2007 and 2008 Point -in-Time Homeless Count

United Way 2-1-1 is the statewide information and referral service for health and human service issues. In 2008, callers in Middlesex County made over 400 requests for information on homeless shelters. Callers do not always identify whether they are a veteran, therefore, data on the number of veterans that called seeking this information is not available.



## Housing for Homeless Veterans

The U.S. Veterans Administration Committee on Homeless Veterans suggests that the top priority for assisting homeless veterans needs to be the development of permanent housing options which include case management for those who need help maintaining their housing.<sup>6</sup> The committee says that there is agreement between several federal agencies including the VA, Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and the Government Accountability Office (GAO) on the following:

*“Veterans in permanent housing where appropriate case management, VA medical care and benefits and other community service are provided, not only escape homelessness, but overwhelmingly remain appropriately housed and in some cases are able to return to employment and are able to achieve a high degree of independence and self-sufficiency.”<sup>7</sup>*

In Connecticut and Middlesex County there are limited accommodations available for homeless veterans and many of the beds available are for transitional rather than for permanent housing. There are also limited beds available for women and families. The VA Committee on Homeless Veterans says that the number of female veterans and those who have children who are homeless is increasing.

### Connecticut Housing for Homeless Veterans

The Connecticut Coalition to End Homelessness estimates that there are approximately 9,000 people in the state who are homeless, including veterans and non-veterans. Given the current state of the economy and the limited amount of affordable housing in Connecticut, CCEH expects the number of homeless to increase. CCEH is encouraging the promotion of supportive housing as the solution to chronic homelessness. CCEH suggests that matching affordable housing with supportive services can keep the chronically homeless out of the emergency shelter system. There is currently a goal of creating 10,000 units of supportive housing in Connecticut.

Below are options Connecticut provides to homeless veterans:

- The VA currently funds 116 beds at 12 sites for homeless veterans through its Grant and Per Diem program (Table 8 and Map 1). Under this program, shelters are reimbursed a certain rate per day for each veteran housed. Each shelter has specific requirements regarding the sobriety of the veteran; some shelters only take veterans who can document sobriety for a certain time period. The shelters also have limits on length of stay. Providers of veteran services interviewed suggested that there are insufficient housing units available that accept disabled veterans and those with alcohol and substance abuse issues.

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<sup>6</sup> U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, *Annual Report of the Advisory Committee on Homeless Veterans*, 2008.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

## Housing for Homeless Veterans

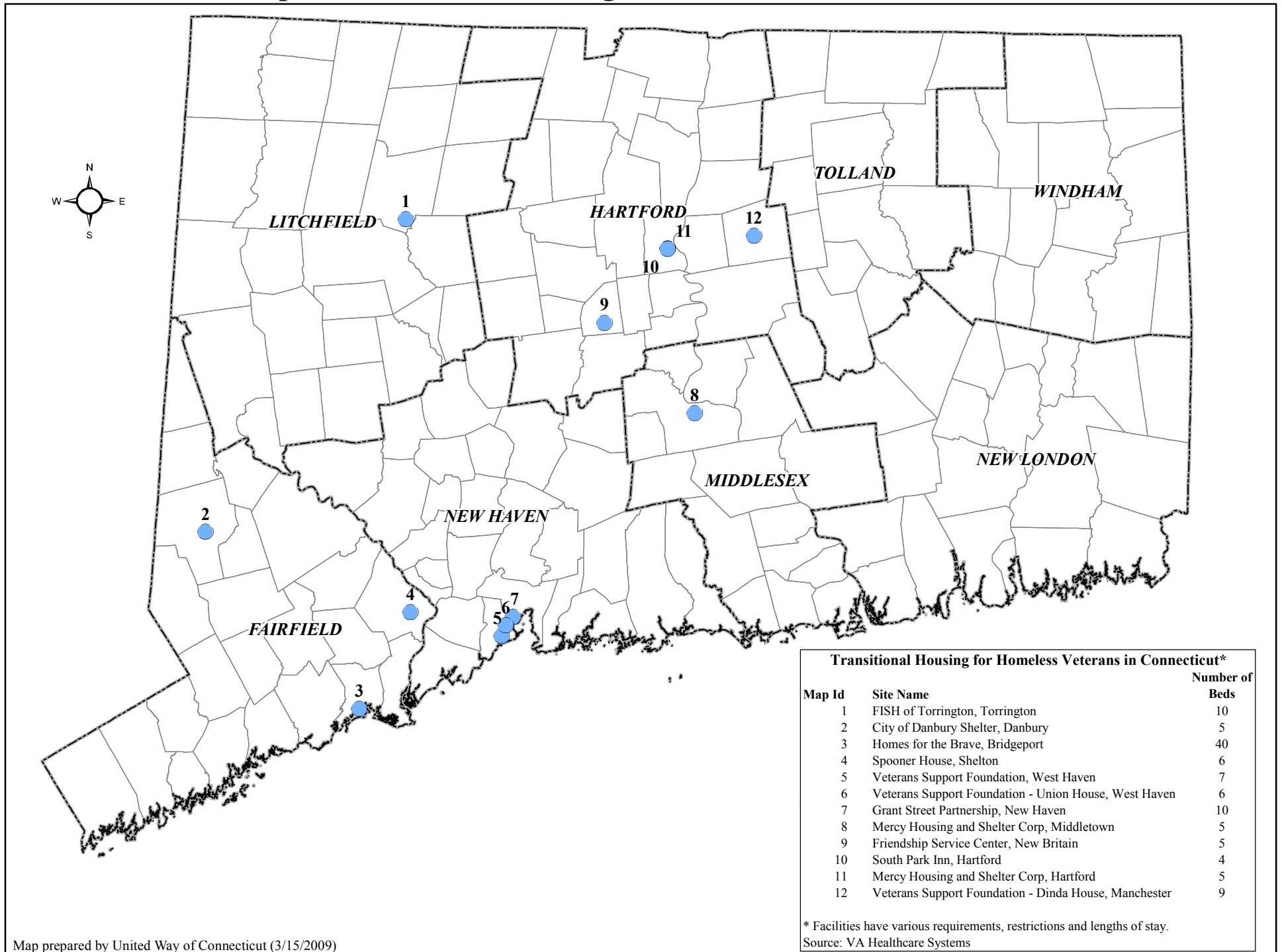
- Homes for the Brave in Bridgeport, one of the aforementioned 12 sites, has been cited as a model of transitional housing for veterans. Since 2002, the facility has provided housing and services to more than 400 people. Homes for the Brave provides support for those who are homeless and are suffering from psychiatric and/or substance abuse problems. The program focuses on helping its residents return to the community. While the facility houses only men, a facility for female homeless veterans is currently being planned.
- The Connecticut Department of Veterans Affairs houses approximately 380 veterans at its residential facility in Rocky Hill. Several veterans interviewed suggested that this facility provides an institutional setting that is not always preferable to veterans who would rather reside within a community.

**Table 8 – Transitional Housing for Homeless Veterans in Connecticut**

Site Name	City	Number of Veteran Beds	Length of Stay	Accept Women?
<b>Middlesex County</b>				
Mercy Housing and Shelter Corp. Shepherd Home	Middletown	5	Up to 2 years	Yes
<b>Fairfield County</b>				
Homes for the Brave	Bridgeport	40	Up to 2 years	No
City of Danbury Shelter	Danbury	5	1 to 2 years	Yes
Spooner House	Shelton	6	90 to 180 days	Yes
<b>New Haven County</b>				
Grant Street Partnership	New Haven	10	60 days	No
Veterans Support Foundation – Bassett Court	West Haven	7	Up to 2 years	No
Veterans Support Foundation - Union House	West Haven	6	Up to 2 years	No
<b>Hartford County</b>				
Veterans Support Foundation - Dinda House	Manchester	9	Up to 2 years	Yes
Mercy Housing and Shelter Corp. St. Elizabeth House	Hartford	5	Up to 2 years	Yes
South Park Inn	Hartford	4	Up to 2 years	No
Friendship Service Center	New Britain	5	Up to 2 years	Yes
<b>Litchfield County</b>				
FISH of Torrington	Torrington	10	Up to 18 months	Yes

Source: VA Healthcare Systems

# Map 1 - Transitional Housing for Homeless Veterans in Connecticut



# Housing for Homeless Veterans

## Middlesex County Housing for Homeless Veterans

In Middlesex County, there are 5 shelter beds that are designated for veterans at the Mercy Housing Corporation's Shepherd House shelter in Middletown. Veterans may stay for a maximum of two years at the shelter. Anecdotally, the beds are usually full. Middletown is the only municipality in the County that has emergency shelter facilities for veterans or non-veterans. Interviews with social service directors in many of the towns in Middlesex County found that some towns will pay for veterans to stay in local hotels for a limited amount of time if they need emergency shelter. Old Saybrook assists 5-6 veterans who have a history of chronic homelessness. The town social service director found that the benefits for these veterans will pay for 3 weeks in a local hotel.

Connecticut State Representative Gail K. Hamm announced the awarding of a \$115,000 grant to address the issues encountered by homeless veterans in Middlesex County. One of the goals is to create permanent supportive housing offering case management, education and vocational job training and substance abuse and mental health counseling.

Currently, the Middlesex County Veteran Steering Committee is considering the creation of a facility that would offer housing to homeless veterans. The housing would be open to those veterans who are disabled and others who are homeless. The committee is considering creating transitional or permanent supportive housing.

The committee has discussed the elements of a housing site that are important for veterans, including:

- Common space to encourage interaction and community building to limit isolation
- A property manager who lives in the building and maintains the property
- A case manager to engage residents in supportive services and help them become involved in the community
- Transportation to the VA for health care services
- Housing that provides a respectable living space
- The opportunity to receive support from other veterans

## Municipal Plans for Housing Homeless Veterans

Several communities in Connecticut have formalized plans that are focused on ending homelessness. Many of these so called Ten Year Plans to End Homelessness include strategies for helping homeless veterans. The list below includes efforts integrated into various ten year plans that are aimed at assisting homeless veterans.

- Greater Bridgeport Area Goal Ten Year Plan to End Homelessness – Includes plans to partner with the Veterans Administration to identify at-risk individuals from Army Reserve and National Guard units returning from active duty and quickly link them to appropriate services to prevent homelessness.

## Housing for Homeless Veterans

- City of Danbury Mayor's Task Force to End Homelessness – Includes plans to develop transitional housing for veterans.
- Hartford's Plan to End Chronic Homelessness by 2015 – Includes a goal to decrease the number of veterans residing in emergency shelters by 30 percent by 2009 and to identify, promote and coordinate access to programs that serve veterans.
- New Haven Ten Year Plan to End Chronic Homelessness – Calls for increasing coordination with services provided by the Veterans Administration and local non-profits to maximize the utilization of mainstream resources for homeless veterans.
- Southeastern Connecticut Ten Year Plan to End Homelessness – Includes a plan to work with state and federal veteran's organizations in order to create discharge plans for returning veterans from the Iraq and Afghanistan wars who are at risk of homelessness.
- The Greater Windham Region Ten Year Plan to End Homelessness – Calls for the creation of a link between the Greater Windham Safety Net Team and the region's Veterans Advisor at Windham Regional Community Council (WRCC) to coordinate services for homeless veterans

In Connecticut, the Veterans Administration provides health care for veterans at its facilities in West Haven and Newington. Eligibility for most health care benefits is based solely on active military service and on whether military personnel were honorably discharged. Reservists and National Guard members may also qualify for VA health care benefits. While most veterans are eligible, many veterans choose to receive health care through a private insurance carrier. Nationally and in Connecticut, approximately 39 percent of veterans who have served in Iraq and Afghanistan have enrolled in VA Healthcare.

Interviews with veterans and those who provide services to veterans say that the VA health care system can be challenging to navigate. They said veterans often need assistance understanding how to find the help they need within the VA and will often seek out fellow veterans to assist them to that end. While recent veterans are given information on the VA before they are discharged, it was said that it can be difficult to grasp all of the details at that time.

It was unclear in interviews with local health care service providers whether they expect to see an increase in military personnel who seek their services as they return from Iraq or Afghanistan. However, many providers of veteran services suggested that it is important for health care providers to be cognizant of the impact of combat on mental and physical health and refer veterans to the VA when appropriate. The VA often automatically screens veterans for disorders such as PTSD (Post Traumatic Brain Disorders), however, this is not a common practice for private health care providers. Interviews with veteran providers recommend that all health care providers gain an understanding of combat related illnesses, barriers to receiving mental health care and the resources available for veterans.

### ***Physical Health***

The recently released statewide needs assessment conducted by for the Connecticut Department of Veterans Affairs reported a number of concerns related to the physical health of veterans who have returned from Iraq and Afghanistan. That research shows that while 80 percent of veterans say they are in excellent health, 48 percent of that group said they are less healthy than they were before their last deployment. Thirty percent reported unmet health needs.<sup>8</sup> Some of the health care concerns reported in that research include: dental problems, reflecting neglect of oral care while in combat; a high incidence of orthopedic problems that may have resulted from the wearing of heavy protective gear that in some cases approached 100 pounds; musculoskeletal problems; and traumatic brain injury.

### ***Mental Health and PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder)***

Research has led to an increase in understanding about the impact of combat on the mental and physical health of soldiers. There is greater understanding that psychological stress and trauma can cause or intensify a number of psychological symptoms and disorders. PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder) is

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<sup>8</sup> Center for Public Policy and Social Research, Central Connecticut State University, *Connecticut Veterans Needs Assessment: The OEF/OIF Project*, October 1, 2008.

one of the best known disorders associated with combat. A recent study by the RAND Corporation found that approximately 18.5 percent of U.S. service members who have returned from Afghanistan and Iraq currently have post-traumatic stress disorder or depression; and 19.5 percent report experiencing a traumatic brain injury during deployment. The study reports that roughly half of those who need treatment for these conditions seek it, but only slightly more than half who receive treatment get minimally adequate care.<sup>9</sup> The statewide veterans needs assessment found that 21.5 percent of soldiers who have returned from Iraq and Afghanistan meet the criteria for PTSD.<sup>10</sup> Vietnam veterans may also still be affected by PTSD. A study conducted 15 years after the end of that war found that 31 percent of men and 27 percent of women met criteria for PTSD at some point since returning from Vietnam and that 15 percent and 9 percent respectively, still met criteria for PTSD at the time of the interview.<sup>11</sup>

Soldiers may experience any range of PTSD or partial PTSD which can interfere with their re-entry into civilian work and home life. It was often suggested that veterans believe that no one can relate to what they have been through, so they don't feel safe talking about their experiences. This can leave them feeling marginalized and can lead to depression, irritability, anger, anxiety, substance abuse and difficulty sleeping. There is concern about the low number of veterans that receive VA healthcare since private providers may not routinely screen for injuries and combat related disorders such as PTSD.

The statewide veterans needs assessment reports that of the 1,000 Connecticut veterans from Iraq and Afghanistan who have filed claims for service connected disabilities, less than a third listed a psychological component to the conditions claimed. The veterans surveyed for that research reported a reluctance to report symptoms of PTSD or mental health challenges.<sup>12</sup> It is often said that there is a stigma for military personnel when it comes to seeking support for mental health issues. It is often feared that receiving psychological help will have a negative impact on a soldier's military future or their employability in the private sector. It was also suggested that some female veterans do not seek help because they do not want to appear weak before their male colleagues.

While there has been a culture within the military that has not always encouraged treatment for mental health issues, it is believed that culture is beginning to change. It was said that the military is beginning to accept that the stigma to seeking support for mental health is one of its biggest problems. The message is beginning to be spread that psychological wounds should be viewed no differently than physical wounds.

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<sup>9</sup> Rand Corporation, *Invisible Wounds, Mental Health and Cognitive Care Needs of America's Returning Veterans*, 2008.

<sup>10</sup> Center for Public Policy and Social Research, Central Connecticut State University, *Connecticut Veterans Needs Assessment: The OEF/OIF Project*, October 1, 2008.

<sup>11</sup> U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, *Trauma and the Vietnam War generation: Report of findings from the National Vietnam Veterans Readjustment Study*. 1990.

<sup>12</sup> Center for Public Policy and Social Research, Central Connecticut State University, *Connecticut Veterans Needs Assessment: The OEF/OIF Project*, October 1, 2008.

### ***Available Supports for Mental Health Care***

#### **National Guard**

Connecticut's Military Support Program provides outpatient counseling service to National Guard members and their families and mental health clinicians have been assigned to National Guard units. The Guard also offers the *Beyond the Yellow Ribbon Reintegration Program* which schedules drills for Guard members at regular intervals for the first 3 months after a soldier returns from combat. The drills focus on a range of reintegration issues including anger management and substance abuse. In addition, the Guard has a state coordinating committee which meets monthly to review the units that are being deployed or are returning home. Workshops are then provided to families and soldiers to offer support for combat related issues.

#### **All Military**

The resources available to all military personnel that have been established to work with soldiers and veterans who are returning from recent combat missions include:

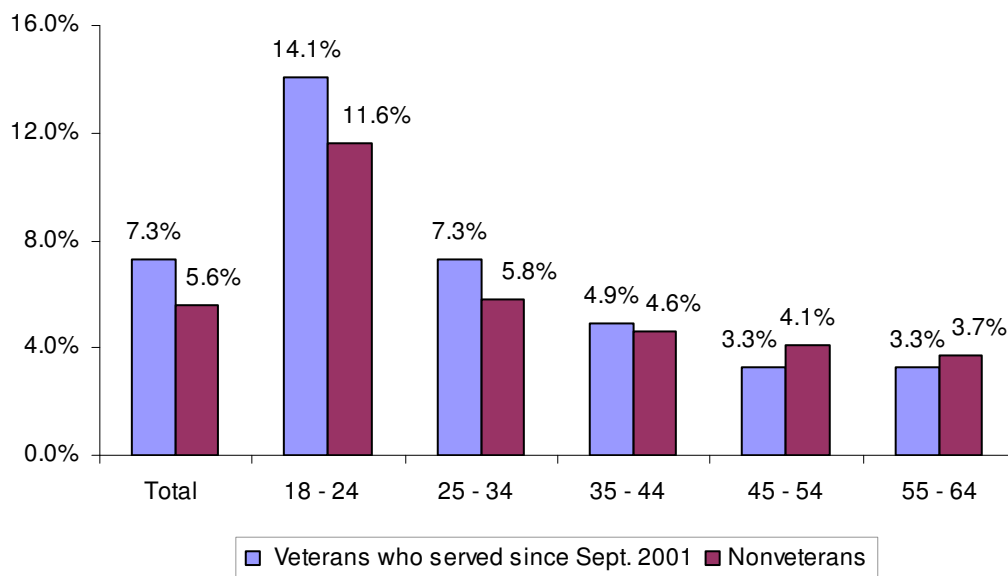
- PTSD clinics at the VA facilities in West Haven and Newington.
- The VA facility in West Haven offers inpatient and outpatient substance abuse treatment. (There is reportedly a waiting list for inpatient services.)
- The Give an Hour program asks mental health professionals to donate an hour each week to provide free mental health services to military personnel and their families. It was developed to assist veterans, who may be reluctant to seek services from the VA, get help for mental health issues. The program offers a wide range of counseling: individual, marital, and family therapy; substance abuse counseling; treatment for post-traumatic stress disorder; and counseling for individuals with traumatic brain injuries. In Connecticut, 225 private licensed mental health clinicians are participating in the program. A participating local therapist said there is a need for more clinicians to enroll in the program, especially clinicians who work with children.
- The VA's Readjustment Counseling Service operates Vet Centers, which provide psychological counseling for war-related trauma, community outreach, case management and referral activities, as well as supportive social services to veterans and family members. In Connecticut, Vet Centers are located in Norwich, Hartford and New Haven. The Centers are open to veterans who experienced combat during wartime or during a period of armed hostilities. They also provide counseling to veterans who were sexually assaulted or harassed while on active duty and bereavement counseling to the families of service members who die on active duty.



## Employment

Overall, the unemployment rate for the veteran civilian workforce is lower than the rate for the nonveteran workforce. At the end of 2008, the unemployment rate for veterans age 18 and older was 4.6 percent while the rate for nonveterans was 5.6 percent. However, the jobless rate for those who have served in the U.S. Armed Forces since September 2001 is higher than it is for nonveterans, especially for veterans at younger ages. The overall jobless rate for those who have served since 2001 is 7.3 percent compared to 5.6 percent for nonveterans (Figure 1). Over 14 percent of veterans ages 18 to 24 are unemployed compared to 11.6 percent of nonveterans of the same age.

Figure 1 – Unemployment Rate for Veterans Serving Since 2001 and Nonveterans



Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2008

Nationwide, over 180,000 service men and women transition from military jobs to civilian life annually. Interviews with job counselors who work with veterans found that veterans can face many issues upon their return from active duty. For some, the transition from combat to their previously held job can be challenging, especially if they had far more responsibility in the service than they did in their civilian position. The Veterans Needs Assessment conducted by the Connecticut Department of Veterans Affairs also found that some veterans need some “decompression” time and are not ready to return to their previous jobs immediately and that some employers may be resistant to hire veterans because of misconceptions about the veterans’ disabilities.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Center for Public Policy and Social Research, Central Connecticut State University, *Connecticut Veterans Needs Assessment: The OEF/OIF Project*, October 1, 2008.

Employment agencies that offer job finding assistance often refer veterans to the VA for assistance. They also alert veterans to all of the services to which they are entitled. One job counselor who has experience working with veterans said that counselors who work with veterans need to be aware of several things:

- Upon discharge, veterans need to be connected with a source who can inform them of all of the programs available locally, not just programs available through the VA. This can include employment resources as well as housing and health care resources.
- Veterans need to be aware of the various training programs available to them. The VA offers training assistance as well as career counseling through Connecticut Department of Labor One Stop employment and career resource offices. There is currently a part-time employee focused on veterans at the Middletown One Stop location.
- Veterans often omit their military experience on their resumes. They need to include military experience and capitalize on their military training and skills.
- Veterans can receive free tuition to state colleges, but need to be aware that the tuition benefit does not cover fees which can cost \$1,500 per semester.
- Veterans may need assistance finding vocational services.
- Veterans are eligible for training under the Workforce Investment Act, through the Connecticut Department of Labor's One Stop program, if they have been laid off or are low income.

While the Connecticut Department of Labor provides priority services to returning veterans, the State's Veterans Needs Assessment found that veterans may experience delays because of reductions in the number of Veterans Employment Representatives (from 34 to 10) in the past three years.<sup>14</sup>

The Employer Support of the Guard and Reserve (ESGR) is a Department of Defense organization that exists to encourage employers to support employees who are in the National Guard and Reserve. They also provide support for guard and reserve members upon their return from active duty as they transition back to their civilian jobs.

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

## Transportation

During interviews with veteran service providers, transportation was often mentioned as a challenge for veterans. This challenge exists for those seeking services from the VA medical facilities in West Haven or Newington, especially for older veterans or those who are disabled. Although there are several options for transportation available, some require a lengthy amount of travel time. Several providers have mentioned that it is not uncommon for veterans to take a taxi to the West Haven VA; round trip taxi service from Middletown to West Haven is approximately \$180. One provider said even though this option is very expensive, it is often used because it can be hard for some veterans to ask for assistance. Other options for transportation include:

- Vans provide transportation from the Newington facility to the West Haven VA Hospital. However, a veteran may still need transportation from their home to Newington.
- St. Luke's Eldercare Solutions of Central Connecticut offers free door-to-door transportation to veterans age 60 and older to the Newington and West Haven VA offices. St. Luke's is currently assisting approximately 50 veterans. Service is not available to younger veterans.
- Disabled American Veterans provides volunteer drivers to take veterans to the VA in West Haven.
- Many local American Legion Posts will provide transportation to the VA.
- Train service is available to those veterans living along the shoreline. Social service directors in some of those towns sometimes provide funding for a train trip to the West Haven VA facility.
- Chester, Essex and Deep River are served by the FISH organization. FISH will transport veterans to the West Haven VA for \$25.

## Challenges for Recent Veterans

A number of issues were raised continually in interviews with veterans and providers of veteran service about the needs of recent returning veterans. These veterans and providers suggest that these issues are important for communities and social service providers to understand.

### ***There is limited information on returning veterans***

- It appears that scant information exists on the discharge or return of active military soldiers. Towns and veteran organizations indicate that it would be helpful to be able to prepare for a returning veteran, especially if they are in need of assistance. Knowing when a veteran is returning can allow for periodic outreach to that veteran. It can also allow a community to welcome the returning soldier, if that soldier so desires.

### ***The preparation veterans receive for re-entry to civilian life can be limited.***

- While soldiers leaving the military undergo an exit interview where benefits and supports are outlined, these interviews are not done uniformly and may not be done at a time when information can be best absorbed. Therefore, veterans are not always aware of the benefits and services available to them.

### ***Women returning from combat can have special needs.***

- Women serving in Iraq and Afghanistan are more likely to have been close to combat than during previous conflicts, indicating that women are suffering from issues they may not have had during previous wars.
- It has been reported that women serving in Iraq and Afghanistan have experienced sexual harassment or assault, often committed by members of their own troop, to a larger degree than in previous wartime periods. Twenty-five percent of women who seek treatment at the VA have had an episode of military sexual trauma.

### ***Families of combat soldiers need support.***

- Support needs to be provided to families of soldiers serving in Iraq and Afghanistan throughout the deployment cycle. Support can be especially needed for young children.
- Veteran Administration benefits do not cover dependents, however support for families is provided through the Vet Centers, the Military Support Program, and the National Guard Family Programs.
- Operation Military Kids is a U.S. Army collaborative program that provides support to the military children in 49 states.

### ***Additional resources for veterans do exist***

- Veterans are often attracted to programs that provide veteran-to-veteran assistance. Regional Vet Centers provide this type of assistance to veterans since they are often operated by veterans. Vet Centers are located in Norwich, Rocky Hill and West Haven.
- The Soldiers, Sailors and Marine Fund provides direct assistance for veterans who are in need of financial assistance. The agency is administered by The American Legion. Temporary assistance is provided for living expenses, utilities, medical care, home health care and funeral expenses.

Those veterans interviewed for the needs assessment offered many ideas on what can be done at the local level for veterans, including ideas about how towns can assist recent veterans who have served in Iraq and Afghanistan. A compilation of ideas is listed below.

### Local Veteran Support

Many towns in Middlesex County have a designated person to help with the needs of veterans. This can be a member of a veteran's organization, such as the American Legion, the Veteran's of Foreign Wars or the Soldier, Sailors and Marine Fund. For some towns, this designated person is the town's social service director. In several towns, it was not clear whether there was a veteran point person in place. Regardless of what organization this person represents, it is critical for all towns to have a visible point person who can assist veterans when necessary.

Several towns in Middlesex County engage in activities aimed at supporting soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan as well as other veterans:

- The Connecticut Cookie Brigade (CCB) was established in Deep River to send cookies to U.S. military personnel at home and abroad monthly. The CCB is operated through volunteers to serve active military, those who are recovering, and military veterans.
- One town displays a banner on the town green to welcome home a returning soldier if the soldier's family approves.
- One town sends packages to soldiers serving in Iraq and Afghanistan and welcomes soldiers home with a potluck supper.
- Town social service departments are often the first contact for veterans in needs of food, clothing or shelter. Towns have various ways of handling these direct requests for service including providing information and referral, limited discretionary funds to assist with temporary financial assistance, food, clothing and access to transportation to the VA.

### Community Conversations

Several suggestions were made toward the need to create a safe environment for veterans especially for those returning from the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. Some of the suggestions are listed below.

- It was suggested that communities need to help residents and all entities in a town understand the challenges surrounding re-entry into civilian life for wartime soldiers. The hope is that this will result in the creation of an environment which will make it easier for veterans to share their wartime experiences if they so choose.
- Create a regional veterans intercommunity counsel where all elements of the community including schools, police, chambers of commerce, universities, non profits and funding agencies can learn about the challenges soldiers and family members face during wartime.

## Community Ideas

- Include veterans in any discussions concerning veteran issues in the community.
- Encourage universities to set aside work study programs for veterans.
- Help the business community understand the impact of war on returning veterans. It was suggested that businesses can be reluctant to hire soldiers who are in the reserves because of the unpredictability of their schedules or those who have served during wartime because of PTSD.
- Help teachers understand how to interact with students who have a parent in the military.
- Develop transitional and supportive housing options for veterans.
- Create and support opportunities for veterans to connect with fellow veterans. Veterans who have served in combat often feel disconnected from their families and from the community and can often be best served by opportunities to connect with fellow veterans.

Several data collection methods were used for this needs assessment to ensure that the perceptions and opinions of many segments of the community are included in the research. Interviews were conducted with those representing various segments of the community including veteran organizations and local social service agencies. The needs assessment also gathered data from publically available sources to attempt to quantify the veteran population.

➡ **Interviews** – Interviews were conducted with representatives from:

- U.S. Veterans Administration
- Connecticut Department of Veterans Affairs
- Connecticut Military Support Program
- American Legion Post 75 and 206
- South Park Inn
- Homes for the Brave
- Mercy Housing Corporation
- The Connection, Inc.
- The Children's Home
- John J. Driscoll United Labor
- St. Luke's Eldercare Solutions of Central Connecticut
- A Homeless Veteran's Advocate
- A Senate Legislative Executive Assistant
- Local Town Social Service Offices
- Local American Legion Veteran Services Officers

➡ **Data from publicly available sources and published reports** – Data from these sources are included to provide perspective on various issues. The sources provide data on veteran population trends, veterans resources and historic perspective.