

South Bend Tribune

Monday, July 13, 2009

th Bend Tribune

www.southbendtribune.com/opinion

Opinion

OUR OPINION

Homeless vets plan builds on shelter success

South Bend could soon open the country's first shelter exclusively for homeless veterans.

Retired St. Joseph Superior Court Judge Robert L. Miller is proposing a project that would build on the achievements of the Center for the Homeless. It's a collaboration that mirrors community commitment that established the center as a model of compassionate help 21 years ago.

Never in the center's history has there been a greater need to serve those who have no alternative to living on the streets. And as is true throughout the nation, former service members represent a significant percentage of the homeless here.

The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs estimates that 154,000 veterans in the United States are homeless on any given night. About twice that many experience homelessness over the course of a year. Conservatively, the VA adds, one out of every three homeless men found sleeping in a doorway, alley or box in our cities and rural communities has put on a uniform and served this country. Nearly half of them suffer from mental illness.

The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs estimates that 154,000 veterans in the United States are homeless on any given night. About twice that many experience homelessness over the course of a year.

Research proves that community-based veterans-helping-veterans programs are most effective with this group. So Miller's idea to expand on the existing homeless center's success with special programs and a separate facility could positively change the lives of scores of men and women here every year.

A retired lieutenant commander in the U.S. Naval Reserves during World War II and the Korean War, Miller was haunted by the all-too-common image of chronically homeless vets.

Last spring, he gathered eight veterans who were residents of the Center for the Homeless and formed them into a drill team that marched in the West Side Memorial Day Parade.

He's now proposing to buy and donate the L.C. Typesetting Co. building next to South Bend's current Center for the Homeless on South Michigan Street for veterans' programs.

Steve Camilleri, executive director of the Center for the Homeless, is excited by the potential that Miller's Vets already being helped might draw in other service members who could be assisted and get back on track.

Camilleri is working to get cost estimates for renovating the former commercial facility. He's also meeting with Veterans Affairs to determine what federal funding is available for the project.

The Miller's Vets drill team was named best adult marching unit in the Memorial Day parade. Hopefully, the men are building on that accomplishment and can find meaning in their lives again.

We hope Miller and the Center for the Homeless find the money to open a veterans' shelter. The much-needed sense of belonging it could provide this deserving group would be invaluable.