

RECOVERY

*The official newsletter of the
Fletcher Group Rural Center Of Excellence*



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DUTY, HONOR, COUNTRY

by Founder and Chief Medical Officer Dr. Ernie Fletcher

“Honor to the soldier and sailor everywhere who bravely bears his country's cause.” Few Americans, if any, would argue with Abraham Lincoln's eloquent tribute. But why then do so many veterans feel uncared for as they battle poverty, homelessness, substance use, and ill health?

It's easy to complain, but a closer look shows that their disconnected lives are due, at least in part, to disconnected and inadequate services. Other issues explored in this issue of our newsletter include public misconceptions, stigma, obstacles to employment, and what each of us can do to support evidence-based programs and best practices.

If we truly believe in the value of veterans and their lived experience, let's prove it by enlisting them as employees, workmates, managers, and counselors. We'll be doing ourselves a favor while helping those who were willing to pay the ultimate sacrifice on our behalf achieve the sense of belonging and purpose they need to come home.

**Fletcher
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The Fletcher Group Rural
Center of Excellence

IN UNIFORM...AND OUT

A hero, it's been said, is someone who's given his or her life to something bigger than oneself. "That military uniform," says six-year veteran Mike Hooper, "is something that's earned by holding yourself to a different standard than others. That's why we look up to our military and our veterans with pride, inspiration, and something akin to hero worship. The military represents the best of us. That's why it's so important that we honor them."

That being said, Hooper admitted to "extremely mixed feelings" in his "Serving Those Who Served" presentation at the Fletcher Group's most recent webinar. "It's not because of the service," says Hooper. "I'm humbled and honored to have been able to serve my country and to have done so honorably."

At peace with the fact that, in war, there are no unwounded soldiers, Hooper's current concern is with a puzzling and tragic paradox: How can Americans admire and revere veterans one moment, then stand with seeming indifference as veterans suffer one devastating hardship after another. The statistics on this page, which Hooper highlighted in our November 2 webinar, come with a warning: they are not merely shocking. For Hooper they're shamefully unbecoming of a nation that thinks of itself as a shining light to others.

Debilitating Poverty

- Over 1.5 million veterans live below the poverty line

Poor Healthcare, Especially in Rural Areas

- 7.4 million veterans living with at least one major health crisis

Rampant Homelessness

- Over 76,000 veterans sleeping on the streets *
- Another 1.5 million veterans are considered at risk for homelessness †
- Veterans are 50 percent more likely to become homeless than other Americans
- Even housed veterans often face dismal living conditions and overcrowded or substandard housing
- Of those housed, approximately 460,000 pay over 50 percent of their income for rent or mortgage ‡



Alarming SUD Rates

- 2.4 million veterans suffer some form of a Substance Use Disorder

Even Worse Alcohol Use

- 1.3 million veterans report an alcohol use disorder, making it the most common addiction among veterans §

Pervasive Mental Health Issues

- 3.9 million veterans suffer from some form of mental illness
- 1.3 million of those (one in three) have a serious mental illness
- Another 1.1 million suffer from both mental illness and an SUD

Suicide

- 6,261 in 2019 for an average of 22 a day ¶

*2020 VA survey
† greendoors.org
‡ National Veterans Homeless Services
§ SAMHSA.gov 2022
¶ 2021 National Veteran Suicide Prevention Report

THANK YOU FOR YOUR SERVICE

The phrase above doesn't work for Mike Hooper. "I don't blame anyone for it because no one has a bad intention. It just rings so hollow when you know how poorly veterans are treated." Hooper says the real culprit is ignorance. "People just have no idea what happens when the uniform comes off."

What You Should Know

"We usually picture an older homeless person," says Hooper, "but 87 percent of military recruits are under 24. They're essentially kids and many of them join to escape extreme hardship including dismal living conditions. And that's what they head back to after serving. The benefits increase the more dependents you have, so many also get married young and have children."

The transition is also challenging, to say the least. "Military skills rarely translate," says Hooper. "You've learned some very adult skills like how to stay alive, keep your buddies alive, and protect the nation's infrastructure. But they have little or no value outside."

Like Coming Out of Prison

Hooper likens the culture shock to what long-term prisoners feel upon release. "You're leaving an institutionalized culture with distinct values, traditions, and cultural practices. To keep hope alive and maintain your sanity, you develop routines that are useful only in that institution. Sure, you'll be thrown a lot of info about job opportunities, housing options, and medical support as you're walking out the door, but it all happens too fast to make sense of. And then there's the misconceptions, stereotypes, biases, and stigma you encounter when civilians realize you're not the super-hero they thought you were and that you might have even more problems than they do."

Feelings of disconnection can extend to friends and family, especially in environments where self-reflection and growth are suspect. "It's easy to lose hope because there seems to be no way out. When you're lost and problems start to compound, many of us, myself included, self-medicate," says Hooper, now in his _____ year of long-term recovery.

But it can get even worse. "Lack of purpose can literally kill because it takes away the will to live. Wearing that uniform fulfilled something inside us. Take it off and it's gone." Thus the shocking suicide rate among veterans.



A Malfunctioning System
America's mental healthcare resources are clearly inadequate, especially in rural areas. But many veterans don't even ask for help, says Hooper. "Unfortunately, society still penalizes people for exposing their disabilities."

The final blow is the cruel irony of knowing you have much to offer but nowhere to show it. "How did we go from hero to someone who can't even get a job?" says Hooper. "You've served your country, you dream of living the American dream, and the best you can do is an entry-level job at a fraction of your former pay. Meanwhile, the same people thanking you for your service say you're not qualified to work with them. Something's got to change!"

(Learn what on the next page.)

WHAT CAN WE DO?

First, rid yourself of misconceptions. Veterans are not mentally unstable, inherently violent, or unteachable. Their experience, loyalty, and diligence actually make them excellent employees and workmates. Second, if you're touched by the plight of veterans, spread the word so others will be inspired to lend a hand.

Promote What Works

"Instead of complaining," says Mike Hooper, "promote evidence-based efforts like vocational training, transitional housing, and programs like SMART Recovery which saved my life."*

You can also make a difference by supporting veteran services. "My hat goes off to the men and women who serve in the VA," says Hooper, "but they can sometimes be more of a hammer than a scalpel so reach out as well to non-profits that specialize in veterans. Look at what's happening—and not happening—in your area and, if it's missing, help start a local peer support program for veterans or an agency that helps them find work."

And don't be afraid to pitch in. "You don't have to be a veteran to help veterans," says Hooper. "The best way to become more knowledgeable is simply to ask around. Veterans will listen and appreciate whatever you offer."

Hire Us!

"Engage us and use us," says Hooper. "It will bring out the best in all of us," Hooper points out that, in contrast to a citizen workforce that can have problems focusing and learning, veterans don't run from problems. They've been tested—*literally*—under fire, have learned a wide range of difficult jobs, and can excel at new tasks not only because they've been through so much but because they have such a strong desire to belong and find purpose. Managing people comes easy for those who've had leadership roles in the military. And those with lived experience, far from being a liability, know the triggers and how to deal with them as opposed to others who may be hiding theirs.

"And don't shoot somebody down for a good position because they don't have a bachelor's degree," says Hooper. "Dig deeper and consider the whole person, their experience under pressure, their approach to problem-solving and their eagerness to meet new challenges."

*Mike Hooper has served as SMART Recovery's National Outreach Director and currently serves as an Addiction Counselor at the Moorhead City Treatment Center in Kentucky. If interested in SMART Recovery, feel free to visit their website at smartrecovery.org. To contact Mike directly, use the Contact Form at fletchergroup.org.



WATCH THE VIDEO

To view Mike Hooper's presentation at our November 2 webinar, simply...

[CLICK HERE](#)



Veterans in Your Home

"Many veterans are tactile, direct, and like structure," says Hooper, "so don't penalize a veteran who's distrustful of faith-based programs. I had that problem myself. Faith was burned out of me so I first needed an evidence-based approach to better understand the trauma I'd been through. I'm not saying stop faith-based training, but it needs to be flexible enough to incorporate other methodologies."

They Deserve It

"By supporting veterans, you're supporting who we are as a people and a nation," says Hooper. "We need veterans as much as they need us and should protect them the same way they protect us."

RURAL VETERAN HEALTHCARE CHALLENGES

Almost a quarter of all veterans in the United States, 4.4 million, return from active military careers to reside in rural communities. Veterans choose rural communities for a variety of reasons: closer proximity to family, friends and community; open space for recreation; more privacy; lower cost of living; or less crowded towns and schools. While Veterans may enjoy the benefits of rural living, they may also experience rural health care challenges that are intensified by combat-related injuries and illnesses.

In rural areas, basic levels of healthcare or preventative care may not be available to support residents' long-term health and well-being. Compared to urban areas, rural communities tend to:

- Have higher poverty rates
- Have more elderly residents
- Have residents with poorer health
- Have fewer physician practices, hospitals and other health delivery resources

Just like any rural resident, it may be difficult for rural veterans and their caregivers to access health care and other services due to rural delivery challenges, including:

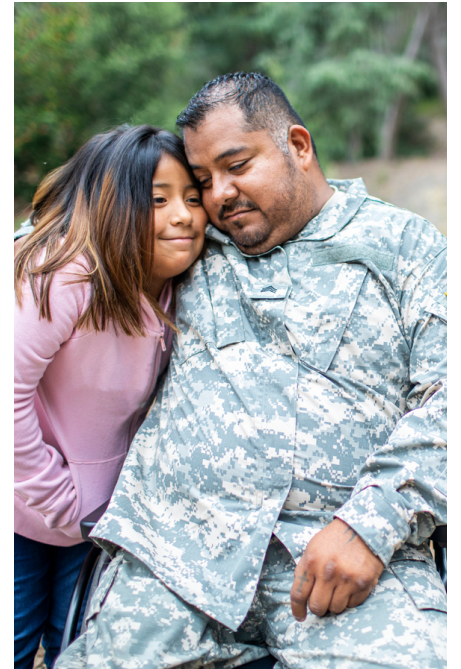
- Hospital closings due to financial instability
- Fewer housing, education, employment and transportation options
- Greater geographic and distance barriers
- Limited broadband internet
- Higher uninsured rates
- Difficulty of safely aging in place in rural America

VA recognizes the need to provide accessible care to rural veterans and allocates 32 percent of its healthcare budget to rural veteran care.

Rural Veteran Demographics

There are 4.4 million rural and highly rural veterans with 2.7 million enrolled in VA.

- 61 percent of rural veterans are enrolled in the VA healthcare system—significantly higher than the 41 percent enrollment rate of urban Veterans
- 58 percent of rural enrolled Veterans have at least one service connected condition
- 8 percent of enrolled rural veterans are women
- 10 percent of enrolled rural veterans are minorities
- 44 percent earn less than \$35,000 annually
- 27 percent do not access the Internet at home



Rural Veterans enrolled in VA's healthcare system are also significantly older: 55 percent are over the age of 65. This older veteran population is medically complex and more likely to be diagnosed with diabetes, obesity, high blood pressure, and heart conditions that require more frequent, ongoing and costly care.

The next generation of rural veterans also has multiple medical and combat-related issues, which will require significant on-going access to care.

• All information on this page is taken directly from the U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs website at: <https://www.ruralhealth.va.gov/aboutus/ruralvets.asp#:~:text=Just%20like%20any%20rural%20resident%2C%20it%20may%20be,of%20safely%20aging%20in%20place%20in%20rural%20America>