

**Hearts and Homes  
for Veterans Inc.  
The HH Story**

History

This extraordinary organization's story began with one man and a pickup truck. That was in late 2012. Driven by a need to help fellow veterans, Don Payton set out on his own to locate and provide assistance for the homeless. As a combat Marine veteran who served in Vietnam, Don was well aware of the struggles that some military personnel experience after their re-entry into civilian life. In spite of his own major health issues at the time, Don took it upon himself to reach as many homeless veterans as possible, and do his part to set them on a positive track towards a better life. Don's vision for what could be done for homeless veterans, even as a grassroots effort, quickly took shape and has resulted in the organization that we know today as Hearts and Homes for Veterans, Inc. Today Hearts and Homes serves both homeless veterans and those in extreme poverty conditions (130% of the U.S. poverty level).

Don's energy and passion for the task he took upon himself quickly spread, and within a short period of time others joined the cause. In February of 2013 a small group of Lee County Florida residents met to discuss ways to assist in addressing this urgent need in the community. Like Don, most of these individuals were also veterans. HH was incorporated in March of 2013 as a 501 C3. Within the first full year of operation HH reached out and served nearly 100 veterans. Since that first year HH has served well in excess of 1000 veterans, just since 2015...and did this with a cadre of volunteers. Today, Don continues to lead the organization, which since its inception has no paid staff on the Hearts and Homes payroll. No small factor in the early success of the organization was Don's willingness to invest tens of thousands of dollars, from his own personal funds, directly into the organization.

Today, HH is housed in a Fort Myers Florida facility that provides a central operating center for a still growing range of services to homeless veterans. Thanks to the generosity of individuals and local businesses, HH assets have grown tremendously. With that growth came opportunities to expand services well beyond the early years of HH. Don's vision of a comprehensive one stop, citizen-led, service became a reality.

The Mission

Hearts and Homes was formed not just to be another charity, but to end homelessness and assist low income veterans in Southwest Florida. Our goal is to help veterans lift themselves out of poverty, and then in turn reach back and help other veterans do the same.

*These veterans stood in line for us and they should not have to stand in line for the basic needs upon their return to civilian life. They should not wait for housing, food and the essential elements of living a decent life. HH was formed to place our veterans first.*

## The Need

Homelessness is a problem throughout the United States, and military veterans are a large constituency in that group. Many of the individuals served by HH have a spouse and children. Their suffering runs much deeper than most of the public is aware.

We also know from research that homelessness contributes to numerous other challenges for society.

- Mental health issues rise; Post Traumatic Stress Disorder is high among all veterans, particularly from the Vietnam era and the long state of war in the Middle East
- Stress leads to many other negative behaviors
- Loss of employment and steady income
- Substance abuse
- Failure to connect with available and entitled public services
- Family breakdowns
- Children exposed to horrendous conditions inhibiting their growth and development
- Suicide...at present an all-time high for military veterans

All of these realities, and more, create a burden far greater on society than does taking action to assist the veteran in need of a safe and secure home. Research tells us that the costs to society are significantly less to aid a veteran before they become homeless or in such a state of poverty.

## HH Current Support Services

HH has come a long way since the earliest outreach in 2013. The veteran need only produce a copy of his/her DD 214; qualify as an individual whose income does not exceed more than 130% above poverty level; and was discharged from the service greater than dishonorable to qualify for HH service to be considered for support. Additional criteria applied at the time of application:

An individual who lacks a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence; or,  
An individual who has a primary nighttime residence that is a supervised publicly or privately-operated shelter designed to provide temporary living accommodations, including welfare hotels, congregate shelters and transitional housing for the mentally ill.

Today, the organization actively supports homeless and low income veterans and their families in the following ways:

- Financial assistance for short term rental and utility costs
- Counseling and advocacy with local, regional and national support networks for veterans
- Arranging for and providing short term funds for transportation
- Holiday outreach programs
- HH physical inventory which is routinely stocked and distributed includes...
  - Food
  - Clothing
  - Bedding
  - Household appliances
  - Furniture
  - Bicycles
  - Personal hygiene items
  - Sleeping Bags
  - Automobiles (donated to HH, put in working order, and passed on to a qualifying veteran)
- Dental care
- Internet access
- Employment counseling and job placement

Additional services are on the horizon at HH and dependent upon securing the necessary funds to launch. Those would include

- Expanded Dental care...on-site services (expected to be in place by Fall of 2020)
- Daily kitchen and meal service
- Laundry
- Showers
- Meeting rooms
- Recreation room
- Temporary housing in an HH facility...*we make an empty house a home*

Between January of 2019 and January 2020, alone, HH had 1158 visits for service (209 of whom are first time visitors to the facility). Of these numbers, 117 were homeless to include entire families. In fact, 53 of the 91 have dependents and minor children. In 2019, 110 apartments were outfitted by HH donations. The value of total goods distributed to these needy veterans in 2019 was \$229,589.

#### Community Agencies Routinely Partnering with HH

HUD-VASH

Jewish Family & Children's Service of the Suncoast

DAV

American Legion – Posts #90 and #38

United Way of Lee, Hendry, Glades and Okeechobee Counties

Lee Community Human & Veteran Services

The Housing Authority of the City of Fort Myers

Affordable Homeownership Foundation Inc.

Lee County Housing Authority

Midwest Food Bank

Testimonial

Stacey is a hero in the eyes of volunteers at Hearts and Homes for Veterans. Although once an officer in the U.S. Army, Stacey fell on hard times after discharge and found herself, and her two daughters, alone and homeless. Stacy and the girls would sleep in camp grounds and parks, in her car, so they would have a place to properly wash themselves. Stacey provided for them as best she could and still managed to get them to daily school.

Hearts and Homes learned of Stacey's plight and stepped in with assistance. Thanks to that effort Stacey and her daughters are now in a stabilized environment and gradually making progress towards a normal life.

This is but one of hundreds of stories of homeless veterans, throughout our region, who were lost to the system. With the help of Hearts and Homes, today, Stacey is giving back by assisting other homeless veterans and their families who are still suffering.

### **Primary Contact Information**

Hearts and Homes for Veterans Inc.

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Revised June 2020