

Fighting for homeless vets

Written by Harry Colbert, Jr.
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Pictured: U.S. Labor Secretary, Hilda Solis speaks with reporters about the department's efforts to get military veterans employment. Solis is flanked by veterans who are either staff of MACV or have come through the MACV program including Jimmy Collier (center), Sean Patterson (behind Solis), Doran Hocker (left) and Kevin Tendall (far left).

Secretary of Labor Hilda L. Solis recently met with area military veterans to discuss the challenges facing homeless veterans.

The Secretary was in town this past week to learn how the Minnesota Assistance Council for Veterans (MACV) is helping transition homeless vets into a more stable life. Solis, who spoke with a small group of vets who have benefited from MACV services, said more attention needs to be paid to the needs of military veterans.

“There are a lot of barriers to reducing veteran unemployment,” said Solis. “Our goal is to reduce many of these barriers and get veterans employed.”

Solis said one of the things she wants to occur is to have employers with jobs that do not require extensive background checks to look beyond certain criminal transgressions that may have occurred in a vet’s past.

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“President Obama feels once military veterans have gone through the justice system, they’ve paid their debts to society and now it’s time for them to become tax payers,” said Solis, who said the way for vets with criminal records to become tax payers is to become gainfully employed.

Solis also pointed out that businesses that decide to employ military veterans can receive up to \$9,600 in tax credits.

MACV, which provides veterans with temporary housing, employment assistance and other services, received federal grants totaling \$300,000 for Twin Cities area vets and \$120,000 for veterans in rural areas of the state. A few veterans who benefited from MACV shared their stories with Solis.

Doran Hocker, an Air Force vet, said he developed a substance abuse problem that led to him becoming homeless. He said MACV Metro Regional Director, Jimmy Collier turned Hocker’s life around.

“Jimmy said if you’ll stay clean (of drugs) I’ll give you a job,” said Hocker. “I stayed clean and he was true to his word.”

Hocker said his goals in rebounding from his past were simple ones.

“I wanted to hug my daughter,” said Hocker. “I wanted to own my own home, car and have a bank account.”

Solis thanked Hocker for his military service and commended him for assisting other vets the same way in which he was assisted.

Navy veteran James Rice shared a similar success story.

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“When I got here (MACV transitional housing) they treated me so good I forgot about my past,” said Rice. “Before, I felt like I was a zero.”

Rice now owns a home in Apple Valley and has started his own business.

Leroy Narmen said while serving in the Navy, his brother died and he suffered mentally because of the loss, which led to serious depression issues. Narmen’s struggles with depression led him to be homeless for nearly 20 years. He credits MACV with helping to deal with the mental issues he was having.

“(MACV) showed me how to deal with the pain of losing my brother and not getting to say goodbye,” said Narmen. “It showed me how to get my pride back.”

Solis said assisting vets with mental health issues is a high priority for President Obama. She said the key is to be able to assist soldiers while they are still serving in the military.

“We know we’ve got to do early detection,” said Solis.

MACV is set to open a new veteran resource center in downtown Minneapolis. The center, located at 1207 Harmon Pl., is due to open its doors sometime in mid-September.

The U.S. Department of Labor recently awarded 64 new grants totaling more than \$15 million to provide 8,600 homeless veterans nationwide with job training for civilian careers. In addition, the department announced more than \$19 million in nationwide funding for second- and third-year grants under its Homeless Veterans Reintegration Program.