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PRESS RELEASE

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More than 150 participate in Lovell FHCC Homeless Veterans Summit to share information, coordinate efforts to end Veterans homelessness

On-site Resource Fair provided information to Veterans and health care providers and others who provide support to Veterans

NORTH CHICAGO, Ill. – Navy Veteran Joseph Yadron, dressed smartly in a suit and tie, hesitantly approached the podium, looked out at the supportive crowd of more than 150 people in Bourke Hall at Lovell Federal Health Care Center, and began telling his compelling story of homelessness and recovery.

“I became homeless due to a long, long fight with un-medicated mental illness,” he said. “I felt alone, worthless and on the brink of suicide.”

If not for the extensive help he received from Lovell FHCC and its community partners and local homeless advocates, “I would have been dead in September of 2007,” he said. “Through the programs in the VA (Department of Veterans Affairs), I am now a self-sustaining, clear-thinking individual living on my own. And for this, I thank you all.”

After he shared his story, Yadron said, “so as the day moves on, we don’t forget why we are here ... we are here for the homeless Veterans like me, who need someone who believe they can be more and they can make it.”

The audience of Veterans, Lovell FHCC employees, and representatives from dozens of community, county and state organizations and agencies dedicated to ending Veteran homelessness, enthusiastically applauded as Yadron thanked them, “from the bottom of my heart.”

Lovell FHCC’s annual Homeless Veterans Summit Feb. 26 served as a stage for collaboration to continue the effort to end homelessness among Veterans, a goal set by Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Secretary Eric Shinseki. The deadline to meet the goal is the end of fiscal year 2015.

“Lovell FHCC is committed to ending Veteran homelessness,” said Navy Capt. José Acosta, deputy director and commanding officer of Lovell FHCC, in his opening remarks. “It’s part of our core business here, helping Veterans ... We’ve adopted the VA’s ‘no wrong door’ policy.”

“No wrong door” means that all Veterans seeking to prevent or exit homelessness must have easy access to programs and services, Acosta said.

The afternoon’s events included a panel discussion with Lovell FHCC representatives and other community representatives involved in helping homeless Veterans and Veterans at risk of becoming homeless. A strategic planning session and resource fair the last hour of the event served to connect social workers, advocates, health care professionals, and others who provide services to Veterans and their families in Southeast Wisconsin and Northeast Illinois, with each other and with Veterans in attendance.

Acosta, Lake County Sheriff Mark Curran, Jr.; Dr. V. Chowdary Jampala, head of mental health programs at Lovell FHCC; Licensed Social Worker Bill Flood, head of homeless programs at Lovell FHCC; Katie Tuten, chair for the Illinois Joining Forces (IJF) Homelessness and Housing working group and a project manager with Catholic Charities of the Archdiocese of Chicago; and Illinois Department of Veterans Affairs (IDVA) Director Erica Borggren served on the panel.

Borggren informed the audience about Illinois Joining Forces, a statewide public-private network of organizations that serve Veterans and military members and their families. She encouraged everyone working toward the same goal of helping Veterans to join IJF so that the efforts of the many far-flung governmental and non-profit groups can be coordinated and consolidated in one place.

“It’s overwhelming how much is out there, even to us, the ones who are providing the services,” Borggren said during her introductory speech. “This navigation of the sea of goodwill is probably one of the biggest issues,” she said, noting that Veterans, too, may get overwhelmed and not know where to turn for help.

Currently IJF, spearheaded by IDVA and the Illinois National Guard, has 180 members across the state. Borggren urged those in the audience not already participating in IJF to sign up, “So we can be smarter about all the work we are doing; to better help Veterans navigating the system.”

Borggren also summarized the role of the state VA, as well as other state agencies to include the Illinois Department of Employment Security and how both agencies collaborate to help Veterans with employment, housing and applying for benefits. She said the “momentum is building” with IJF, noting she recently accepted an Abraham Lincoln Pillars of Excellence Award from Shinseki at a ceremony in the White House, in recognition of the creation of IJF. The VA’s Lincoln Pillars of Excellence Awards recognize state partners for outstanding programs that support Veterans in their states.

Flood briefly outlined the homeless Veterans program at Lovell FHCC, which includes a recently opened Walk-in Center for Homeless Veterans located in the main hospital facility in North Chicago, Ill. “It’s has been a huge success,” he said. “If a Veteran shows up homeless today, we do everything we can to get them housing tonight ... Word is getting out to the Veterans that if they have any kind of question, they are likely to get it answered there.”

Flood noted that Lovell FHCC partners closely with the Lake County Veteran's Assistance Commission to place Veterans in emergency and temporary housing.

Flood estimated that Lovell FHCC will serve about 500 homeless Veterans during a three-year period that began in 2013.

Several current and former residents of "Building 66," also known as "the Dom," (Lovell FHCC's Domiciliary Care for Homeless Veterans Rehabilitation Program), stepped forward and asked questions of the panel. A single-parent female Veteran said she was told she didn't qualify for housing assistance because she didn't meet the definition of "chronically homeless."

Flood said she and many others who don't meet the specific requirements for Department of Housing and Urban Development - VA Supportive Housing (HUD-VASH) vouchers now may be helped through Support Services for Homeless Veteran Families (SSVF). The VA recently announced the availability of up to approximately \$600 million in SSVF grants for non-profit organizations and consumer cooperatives that serve very low-income Veteran families occupying permanent housing. SSVF organizations in Lake County include Catholic Charities, Transitional Living Services (TLS) Veterans, and Volunteers of America.

Another female Veteran who was helped through Lovell FHCC informed the audience about Women Veterans United, a new local organization that specifically helps female Veterans.

Participants in the resource fair were grateful for the opportunity to either have a table or get information and coordinate with others working to end Veteran homelessness. "This summit is a blessing," said Christopher LaFayette, a homeless advocate from Veterans Housing and Employment Assistance. "I see highly motivated servant-leaders uniting to share referrals and references to end Veteran homelessness."

The formal part of the summit ended on a high note, when the audience gave formerly homeless Army Veteran Glen Simmons a standing ovation after he told his story.

A former truck driver, Simmons' fortunes changed in a day when he suffered congestive heart failure 12 years ago. Subsequent medical problems kept him from working; he could no longer pay for his home of 14 years, and thus a cycle of temporary housing and homelessness followed.

"My emotional distress was astounding," he said. "But I didn't let anyone know. I was embarrassed."

Three things happened that saved him, he said. The first was he received emergency housing through the Interfaith Network Nightly Shelters (INNS) program in Kenosha, Wis., and the second was he was treated by "a wonderful team of doctors, nurses at Lovell FHCC, all who have reached out with excellent care and respect ... Instead of just a number on the job, I was treated as an individual."

The third thing was a fellow Veteran suggested he look into all the benefits offered by the VA. Since then, he has work with homeless program staff at Lovell FHCC to secure permanent housing; participated in the Vocational Rehabilitation Program at Lovell FHCC, and started a part-time job with INNS in Kenosha.

Simmons ended by saying what he most wanted to tell other Veterans is, “there are people and programs awaiting them.”

See photos below and attached. More photos and captions are available on Lovell FHCC's Facebook page: www.facebook.com/lovellfhcc

About the Lovell FHCC: The Lovell FHCC was established Oct. 1, 2010, as the nation's only fully integrated Department of Veterans Affairs/Department of Defense federal health care center. The center has a dual mission of caring for Veterans and ensuring the medical and dental readiness of U.S. Navy recruits and active duty members serving in the region. Lovell FHCC, which is located in North Chicago, operates four Great Lakes Naval Station clinics and three community based outpatient clinics in McHenry and Evanston, Ill. and Kenosha, Wis. The facility also serves military families and retirees.



On the left, Jamison Hild, Case Manager for Supportive Services for Veterans and Families, talks to Cristofer Mishler, from Thresholds, during the resource fair at the Lovell Federal Health Care Center annual Homeless Veterans Summit 2014. (Photo by Jayna Legg, Lovell FHCC Public Affairs)



Alan Belcher, director of special programs for TLS (Transitional Living Services) Veterans, asks a question during the strategy session at the annual Lovell FHCC Homeless Veterans Summit 2014. (Photo by Jayna Legg, Lovell FHCC Public Affairs)



Illinois Department of Veterans Affairs Director Erica Borggren gives introductory remarks and explains the mission of Illinois Joining Forces at the Lovell FHCC annual Homeless Veterans Summit 2014. (Photo by Jayna Legg, Lovell FHCC Public Affairs)



Bill Flood, head of homeless programs at Lovell FHCC, outlines what services homeless Veterans, or Veterans at risk of becoming homeless, can receive through Lovell FHCC. He noted that the new Walk-in Center for Homeless Veterans at the Lovell FHCC's main hospital in North Chicago has seen increased foot traffic as word gets out about what help is available in the center. (Photo by Jayna Legg, Lovell FHCC Public Affairs)