

The community we chose to focus on is the VA hospital and the Vietnam War veterans that benefit from its services. We felt that the veterans of long beach were a highly neglected community that has been very stigmatized and forgotten about. As CSULB students who drive by this hospital everyday while looking for the most convenient parking, we tend to focus on ourselves instead of our surroundings. Therefore we interviewed three individuals who gave perspectives of their own lives. Our main concern was, why do we have homeless veterans? Higgins is a homeless man in his 60s who we met in the cafeteria of the VA hospital, and this is what he said.

The main reason you see so many homeless veterans is you have to know what happens psychologically. When you take a fresh out of high school or college, a person and you put them under absolute on restrain insanity. Until you get that soldier to shot kill someone, mutilate, his first person especially, first couple and until you get that soldier to that point where he could sit shoot a 6 year old baby and not feel anything, you got yourself a killing machine which is what you want. That psychologically, most people are not raised or ready to do that. Once they do that they can never get over it, and that's what PTSD is.

Next we interviewed Kent, a former veteran and a current employee of the VA hospital who works for the PEER center, which stands for partnership in a effective recovery. Here he talks about the experience working with homeless veterans and the results of their mental illness.

Kent:

Part of your project is again to, the mental illness side of it. Because again like I said, I think there is veterans that bravely and courageously serve their country, but and it's almost as though they are expecting because they were promised things, they were promised benefits. And now they have found themselves in a situation where they have almost become sick and being worried about it. But not almost, some of them have. Where it become a systemic illness for them.

Where it's almost become a systemic mental illness for them. It leads to depression, depression leads to; some of them have latent bipolar disorder. They don't really realize they got bipolar disorder. Sometimes they'll get... Which is. Are you familiar about what bipolar is? It's when you are very manic at times. Which makes you think you can do a hundred things, which makes you think that you are Jesus Christ or things like that. And the other times, there will be a period of months that you are very very depressed. And we have the schizophrenic veteran who hears things, and sees things, and feels like he is being persecuted by voices. The voices project into people. So we got a job we're doing down here at this peer center and I hope we are doing it well enough, I'm sure that we are. Little bits that we can the best we can. It's the only program here on site, called veterans vocational rehabilitation training. That a veteran is motivated enough to participate he can work himself into a job here on the VA ground or even out in the community.

Michael is a homeless veteran that spends much of his time at the peer center with other homeless veterans. Here he briefly talks about his life.

So what made you enlist then??

Well I wanted to have a wife and a family and a life you know. But at the time I was 17 I had the capabilities of marine corp. offered me because they spot people; young people anyone who is a prospect. So they showed me and talked to me. I wanted to be stronger and it takes a lot to raise a family and be responsible and everything. And when I sit down and look at my girlfriend id think I would have to be strong and established, and I'm barely going to be carrying the weight. Be there and kids and that's my marine corp. experience. I have kids and stuff now but well uh I want to use and establish my talents and the Marine Corps schools are trade schools are quite accepted and things that they teach you in them seem to stick with you. I am having a hard time like anyone in the army I not a good trooper. My wife is away, or are away. So up on with family. SO it's a struggle with myself, like I ain't too good or it's not easy. So probably like...

So how many years were you enlisted for?

Uh 4.

Uh, 4. So how was your transition when you came back?

Well not good, not good. It wasn't good because I got sick. So it's kind of terrifying, I would share some confidential information with you. About my dates about being in the service and what services I served in but I really don't want to talk about that. My first tour of duty was the marine corp., but it does go much further and in deeper but it's hard to explain though. But there was an incident and transition when I got back home it's not what you think it is. It is like mentally as a patient. War is real. Did I tell you I am having a bad day? I don't think. Transition not good. I had to go to the VA hospital all the time. As a matter of fact I wouldn't be here. It's hard to explain the Persian Gulf. 1981 coming home and what it was like, just to say I have been in other branches of the military, and I serviced honorably at the time because I found the chances of me going home, I couldn't do it because what I trained in that in the military its conservative and it doesn't hardly change. As so it's a problem and I couldn't see that going in, I was in, so I just went back in. So I have other duty service, there and the navy and it's a longer term. As honorable it's a long term. I'm proud that I'm successful at that. But in doing other conflicts and stuff believe me it's extremely difficult to be patient and to be efficient and to be right. And in the navy I was a cook.

Narrator: So for those with mental illness who can no longer re-enlist, Higgins gives us a summary of the Va's treatment.

Higgins: Primarily what they plan on doing, especially if they suffer from PTSD is they will keep them heavily drugged so that they can just go from day to day. So that's

what you call maintaining. They will maintain themselves in that position. You could go out to Cabrillo and a whole bunch of US veterans who have really bad PTSD. They got some of the best drugs in the world. Where they gone get them? Right here in the VA. This is their lifeline and this is there connection, and the government will keep them on whatever drug they want.

Here Kent explains to us how his transition was not provided with counseling.

I never as a veteran as myself have never been offered any type of counseling in that regard. If I would to, I would, how would you call it? As a preventative measure of that happening sometime in my life. To know that there are resources there, I don't know if there any resources there that the veterans administration provides. Let me just say that the veteran administration has been wonderful to me, in my health care. So I don't want to say anything negative about the VA

Narrator: That's why we have this place

Veterans find out about us through word of mouth.

Narrator: Oh my gosh

And some brochures that we have.

Narrator: This place is so big too. So you're saying there's other veterans who are, throughout long beach and this area have no idea this place exists.

Right. We get new people every week, ever three or four days that we have never seen before. Well they say that "Wow I never knew this place existed, I'm so so grateful that's it's here. I can finally take a shower after not being able to take a shower after weeks.

Narrator: So if I, so if I stumble upon a homeless veteran and I say "Do you need service?" Could I drive them here?

Yes, well yes.

Narrator: Would I just drop them off?

Well the first thing we need to do is, the first few times. Well that's the dilemma that some homeless veterans face. Is that they are not in the system, with their social security number or their service number.

Narrator: Oh ok. That's another issue, to be identified.

To receive services in the main hospital. Identification, but we are going to do our best that we can here to get them hooked up with services. Sometimes the police will just go

pick them up, if they are down at Lincoln Park or living along a railroad bed or a riverbed. Liked Los Angeles river, where its level enough to put their camp. They will just come in and pick up their stuff throw it back into the truck and send it off to the dump or land fill. Yea, that's happened quite frequently. Quite regularly.

Would you encourage younger people to enlist into the military again?

I think I would encourage people to enlist into the military as long as there is no war going on.

Laughing...

Narrator: Wow. That makes sense.

I think it promotes values you mature greatly when you are in the military.

Thank you for that. I hope we can really to put this issue into light. So we can treat our veterans who are homeless with more respect around here.