

VETERANS OF FOREIGN WARS

VFW

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IN KANSAS CITY & NEW ORLEANS



118th National Convention
**'THE BIG EASY'
HOSTS VFW**

**BRINGING
SMOKE THE
DONKEY
BACK FROM IRAQ**

'WE CAN PREVENT HOMELESSNESS'

VETERANS

COMM
PRO



AN AMBITIOUS PROJECT IS TAKING SHAPE IN KANSAS CITY, MO. LED BY THREE VFW MEMBERS, CONSTRUCTION OF A VILLAGE OF TINY HOMES AIMS TO END VETERANS HOMELESSNESS IN THIS MIDWESTERN METROPOLIS.

BY TRACI BADALUCCO

PHOTOS BY SUSAN MCSPADDEN





Bryan Meyer, Chris Stout and Kevin Jamison stand in front of the headquarters of the Veterans Community Project (VCP) in July in Kansas City, Mo. The three men — all veterans and VFW members — form VCP’s leadership team and say they hope the village they create in Kansas City will be the first of many in the country.

Bryan Meyer glances up from the pile of folders on his handmade, wooden desk at the Veterans Community Project (VCP) headquarters at 89th Street and Troost Avenue in Kansas City, Mo. It’s 10 a.m. on a Friday, and there’s already a line of people at the door waiting to see him.

If someone had told him a year prior that he would find himself in his current position, he never would have believed it.

Meyer, 34, chief legal officer at VCP and a former Marine Corp helicopter crew chief, used to spend his days practicing public education law in Kansas City.

Now, he provides legal counsel to homeless veterans in the area, handling contractual affairs for VCP, and doing interviews with the media. Meyer added that VCP, which he and three other veterans co-founded two years ago, keeps him busy.

“The fact of the matter is this isn’t a traditional job,” said Meyer, a member of VFW’s Department of Missouri. “I used to think I worked a lot of hours at my firm.”

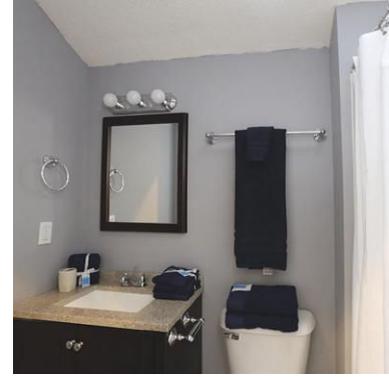
‘VETERANS VILLAGE’ WILL AID TRANSITION

VCP — a nonprofit organization founded in 2015 — is a community of 50 tiny homes that will serve as transitional housing for homeless veterans around Kansas City. The homes — each 240-square-foot in size — will occupy 4.2 acres of land across the street from the organization’s headquarters.

The community, known as “Veterans Village,” will offer veterans support services, including counseling, legal assistance and yoga classes for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Cooking courses, job search assistance and other recreational activities also will be available.

The idea, the group says, is to aid homeless veterans at their own pace as they transition back into society.

“A lot of these guys are out there on the street because they want some form of isolation,” said VCP Chief Executive



Officer Chris Stout, a life member of VFW Post 7397 in Lenexa, Kan.

“I think it’s a misconception to think that all these guys are homeless because of lack of money, especially when it comes to a veteran. They are just there because they don’t have the social skills to live in an apartment building.”

Stout, 36, a medically retired Army staff sergeant, said the VCP community allows veterans to assimilate slowly to everyday life. Because each veteran will have their own house, they can socialize with others when and if they feel comfortable.

THEY TOOK THE OATH, ‘JUST LIKE ME’

The idea for the project came to fruition in 2015 when Kevin Jamison — a retired Marine Corp chief warrant officer and VCP’s chief operations officer — and Stout connected while doing outreach work with homeless veterans in Kansas City. Each was working at non-profit organizations and saw a gap in the social system. Too many veterans were being told, “No,” by the organizations that were supposed to help them.

Some veterans hadn’t served long enough. Others didn’t qualify for the full range of VA benefits and services. Then there were those who had faced legal troubles.

“I was leaving as many veterans on the streets as I was helping, and it just wasn’t sitting well with me,” said the 48-year-old Jamison, a member of VFW Post 5717 in Kearney, Mo. “These are people who took the oath just like me. Why am I treated better just because I got deployed to Iraq?”

That’s a question that set the groundwork for the idea of VCP. From there, the group’s mission was born: to end veteran homelessness by serving anyone who

took an oath.

“I don’t think you’re defined by the last thing that you’ve done,” Stout said. “I know there are people who have served 10 years, maybe have a couple of deployments under their belt who don’t qualify because they drank and drove. It doesn’t make them a bad person. It doesn’t make their service less honorable.”

According to the Greater Kansas City Coalition to End Homelessness, there were 170 homeless veterans in the city in 2016, up about 28 percent from 122 in 2015.

And in the U.S., there were almost 40,000 homeless veterans in 2016, according to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). Reasons vary, including a lack of affordable housing, limited access to health care, and the effects of PTSD and drug and alcohol abuse.

Another 1.4 million veterans in the U.S. are at risk of becoming homeless because of poverty and inadequate support networks.

‘GIVE THEM SOMETHING WORTH LIVING FOR’

The founders of VCP easily could have been included in that statistic, they say.

“I got lucky,” Jamison said of the family support he received when he hit rock bottom in 2012 from a string of issues, including PTSD. Jamison said he was prepared to sleep in his car until he received a call for a job as a security officer.

Others, however, aren’t so lucky. And many give up hope after years of rejection.

“How are you able to convince someone who has been living on the streets for 20 years that it’s time to connect?” Jamison said. “You give them something worth living for and fighting for. I wanted to give them something where I walk up to them in the woods and I say, ‘Here are

the keys,’ and take them to their house.”

Starbert, a retired Army radar technician who goes by the street name Whitehawk and declined to give his last name, has been homeless for 20 years in Kansas City. Jamison met him at his camp two years ago. The two have remained in contact, and Whitehawk agreed to live in the Veterans Village when it opens.

“It was great,” Whitehawk said of the tiny house model he saw with Jamison at the VCP property. “It was like a regular house. I decided I might want one.”

The best that can happen, he said, is to remain in the village and eventually transition to a life off the streets. The worst that can happen is returning to his camp in the woods.

“I want to see,” Whitehawk said. “I’m going try it. It can’t hurt me to try.”

What makes the village appealing, he said, are the quality of the homes and the ability to transition at his own pace.

‘NOBODY CAN BUY US’

Transition time could vary, Jamison said. Some veterans will stay for six months or less, depending on their situation. Most will stay six months to a year, he explained, stressing the need for veterans to take advantage of the services provided at VCP.

To eliminate some of the “red tape” — or barriers — that many veterans like Whitehawk face when applying for social services, VCP refused to fund their project with government money.

“If you take government money, you have to use their definition of a veteran and it has a lot of restrictions on how you can use it,” Jamison said. “We can prevent homelessness by moving faster.”

Instead, they seek funding through foundations, private individuals and corporations.



LEFT: A 240-square-foot finished “tiny” house at the Veterans Village in Kansas City, Mo., includes a sleeping area, a front stoop with the motto of the Veterans Community Project engraved on the stairs, a bathroom and a fully functioning kitchen. One resident described the \$10,000 - \$15,000 homes as “just like a regular house.”

RIGHT: Adam Abramson, VCP’s director of operations, and Matt Burasco, administrative assistant, install a light at a tiny house in July in Kansas City, Mo.



“It’s not about the money,” said Brandonn Mixon, VCP director of facilities and a medically retired Army helicopter crew chief. “Nobody can buy us. We care about other veterans and that’s what makes us special.”

Fundraising has increased dramatically over the past year. For example, VCP raised \$5,000 in April 2016. In April 2017, it accepted \$359,000 in donations.

The group broke ground in July for a \$1.1 million sewage system and has plans to start housing veterans next month. The construction process, however, has been one year in the making.

The organization purchased the land where the village is constructed from the city for \$500 in February 2016. In March, the group purchased the VCP headquarters building for \$125,000. When the bank refused to loan VCP money because of a failed environmental inspection, Stout borrowed money on his home mortgage to front the bill. When the story went public a week later, a private donor came forward and paid it off.

“Every time we build something, every time we open something, the response is great,” Meyer said. “There are a lot of donors who really like to see that we have that skin in the game.”

80-HOUR WORK WEEKS ARE ‘WORTH IT’

VCP has garnered national attention with stories on CNN and the Associated

Press. Phone calls have poured in from states as far as California and Arizona with requests to build similar projects. The group’s efforts also have attracted international attention.

In April, the organization was nominated for the One Billion Acts of Peace Campaign — an international citizens’ movement that aims to drive change and address important global issues — for their work. VCP was selected from more than 8 million submissions from around the globe and was among 11 other finalists.

The guys work almost 80 hours per week — sometimes more — between regular office hours, construction, promotion events around town and speaking engagements with potential donors.

But the endless hours are worth it, they said. Much like the project will aid veterans in their transition back to life off the streets, it also has helped the co-founders on their own path to recovery.

Mixon, 26, said VCP gave him a new purpose in life. After being medically discharged from the Army due to an injury he sustained in Afghanistan, he returned home and eventually became depressed.

“I struggled with PTSD and suicide

and this gave me an avenue,” Mixon said. “I wake up and I can make a difference.”

Mixon, who has a background in heating and cooling, manages the construction side of operations. He joined the project in May 2016 and built the first tiny home from a simple shell the group purchased out-of-pocket for \$3,200.

The group worked around the clock to complete the house in 12 days to meet a ribbon-cutting deadline in May 2016.

AMBITIOUS PLANS MOVING FORWARD

What began as an idea has evolved into five, full-time employees, four part-time employees, and thousands of volunteers, including electric companies and faith-based groups.

United Heating, Cooling and Plumbing, of Grandview, Mo., for example, has provided thousands of dollars worth of HVAC services free of charge. They also sponsored a \$10,000 tiny house.

Others have donated manpower to help build the tiny homes — at a cost of



LEFT: Kevin Jamison, chief operations officer of the Kansas city-based Veterans Community Project, and a volunteer greet visitors to VCP's traveling tiny house on display in July at VFW's National Convention in New Orleans. Jamison said many of the attendees were interested in obtaining advice about how to be more active in their communities and how they might conduct similar projects.

up to \$15,000 each.

"There's not a lot of well-known opportunities for the general public to give back to veterans through sweat equity," Meyer said. "Not everybody can financially donate."

VCP also has expanded into other areas to serve veterans, including its partnership with the Kansas City Area Transportation Authority and the Kansas City Veterans Administration that allows local veterans to ride city buses free of charge. Since its inception, the program has eliminated transportation barriers for hundreds of local veterans.

The group has no plans of slowing down. In five years, their hope is to replicate the project in other U.S. cities.

"If we aren't in city No. 2 (by 2022), then I've failed," Stout said. "That would just be irresponsible for us. It means we aren't working hard enough."

For now, the guys can be found at the VCP headquarters day-in and day-out, fulfilling their duties until their project comes full circle. And on most days, among the sounds of drills and wood cutters, they can be heard laughing it up as they play practical jokes on one another around the office.

Their co-workers, just like the veterans they serve, are their brothers and sisters.

When they embarked on this journey almost two years ago, none would have imagined they would come so far in such a short time.

"We were just four dudes trying to serve vets better," Jamison said. "We didn't know what we had. We just believed in what we were doing. And we keep doing what we are doing because we believe in it." ✦

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Tiny Model Home Draws 'Thousands' at Convention

As part of its commitment to ending veterans homelessness, VFW invited a group of Kansas City-based VFW members to its national convention in July. The group, representing the Veterans Community Project (VCP), brought along a model "tiny house" to show convention attendees what they are building in the Midwestern city.

"It was a really awesome experience," said Kevin Jamison, chief operations officer for VCP. "VFW's convention in New Orleans was the most professional, best organized convention I've ever been to."

Jamison said the model tiny home VCP displayed at the convention attracted "thousands" of attendees to their booth.

"It really helped spread the word about VCP," said Jamison, a member of VFW Post 5717 in Kearney, Mo. "It was amazing publicity for us. We really appreciate what VFW at all levels has done for us. We have support from the national leadership and the response at the convention was tremendous."

Jamison said convention attendees asked for advice about conducting similar projects in their towns and cities. He suggested that they "get involved" with their communities.

"They need to reach out to younger vets and other Posts in their areas," the 48-year-old Marine Corps vet said. "Our project wouldn't be around if it weren't for VFW Posts. Some even told us 'We're going to raise money for you.' For example, a Post in Lee's Summit, Mo., has sponsored one of our tiny houses."

VFW leaders said it was important to have representatives from VCP and a model tiny home at the convention.

"Their appearance showcased to our members the creativity of a group of Kansas City-based veterans who are helping to fight veterans homelessness," said Kevin Jones, VFW assistant adjutant general. "VFW's involvement with VCP will help both groups work toward the goal of ending veterans homelessness."

Jamison said VCP is committed to that objective.

"Homelessness is a community problem," he said. "Defeating it starts at the local level. But we want to end veterans homelessness throughout the nation. That's why we're going to spread this effort to other cities. VFW will be a big help in that regard."