

VETGROUP INC.

VETS HELPING VETS (alternate title)

Exposure to and participation in violence changes people.

You do not have to be a social scientist to know that a young person in his late teens or early twenties, who is brought up in a Christian, democratic, and peace loving culture, is going to be in for a cultural shock and change when exposed to warfare and its effects. Our veterans have seen these effects, whether it was Afghanistan, Iraq, Vietnam, Korea or wherever American servicemen have been called on to serve.

Very few veteran programs exist to address these changes. Vetgroup is such a program. Vetgroup Inc is a 501c3 not-for-profit corporation consisting of three programs.

The Ocean County POW MIA program was started in 1984 in order to publicize the fate of our missing in action servicemen, and to get the public and our elected officials to recognize the problem. A group of Vietnam Veterans from Ocean County, New Jersey thought it was important to let people know that over two thousand servicemen were unaccounted for from the Vietnam War.

The efforts of these vets to assist in this cause and their contact with other vets made them aware of a growing problem with a small group of veterans who were having trouble readjusting to society. These veterans were having difficulties dealing with Civilian life and were encountering problems such as unemployment, substance abuse and relationship issues. It soon became evident that Post Traumatic Stress Disorder was perhaps an underlying contributor to these problems.

The handful of veterans involved in the POW MIA awareness campaign then branched out and incorporated in 1987, in order to provide assistance to these veterans. Tom Haskell, one of the founding members and the Secretary/Treasurer of the organization, remembers saying, "we would start the Vetwork program and help those vets who needed it and be done in a year". Haskell said, "Eighteen years later it seems like we have not even scratched the surface". The Vetwork program was designed to address shortcomings in earlier PTSD treatment programs.

Post Traumatic Stress Disorder is a natural reaction to unnatural events, and is marked by such symptoms as moodiness, rage, flashbacks, inability or lack of desire to maintain a job, sleep irregularities and tension and stress. An early program to deal with PTSD was unsuccessful, and it was soon realized that if a vet did not have a job, was abusing alcohol and or drugs and was constantly fighting with his family, dealing with PTSD would not be possible. Conversely, getting a vet a job without solving the substance abuse and PTSD, would only result in the vet losing the

job. Solving substance abuse and PTSD would be difficult without addressing PTSD and so on. Consequently, we determined that the best way to help these veterans was to treat all of the problems and to manage the entire case, rather than just dealing with one aspect at a time. The Vetnetwork program was designed to do just that, provide a "one stop shop" to a veteran in need of assistance. We later added a part time entitlement officer, who would make sure that the veteran who was being assisted, would also be put in for all entitlements that were due. Also added was a transportation program to take veterans to doctor's appointments and VA facilities.

Years later a third program was added, called Vetserve that would assist homeless veterans. This third program would offer emergency shelter, mortgage and utility assistance and ultimately subsidized housing. Also provided was a food bank and coordination with the Veterans Administration for placement into domiciliary and substance abuse programs.

The three programs are run and supervised by a Board of Directors consisting of twelve combat veterans who represent the Army, Air Force, Navy and Marine Corps. The veterans also were participants in World War II, Vietnam, Korea or the Persian Gulf. The Board and Officers of the corporation are all non-paid volunteers. There are three officers of the Board: President, Tom Waskovich, Saint Augustine, Florida; Vice President, Gary Rieth, Roxbury, New Jersey; and Secretary/Treasurer, Thomas Haskell, Waretown, New Jersey. They oversee the non-funded POW MIA program and the grant funded Vetnetwork and Vetserve programs. Funding for the programs comes from a number of grant, government and community sources.

The paid staff of Vetgroup includes two full time employees, a director and a program analyst. Both are certified social workers. There are six part time employees that include a secretary, outreach worker, a job developer and three part time drivers. Also available at our offices once a week are two Federal Veterans Administration Vet Center counselors, who hold various counseling sessions at our facility. The Board of Vetgroup Inc. relies on part time and attached personnel to maximize our resources.

In Ocean County, New Jersey, where we are located, we have a veteran population in excess of seventy thousand people, and overall population of over a half a million people. There was one State and one County veterans service officer to serve those seventy thousand veterans when we founded our organization. Early on we decided that we would not duplicate services offered by the County and State but would augment what they did with more expanded and diverse in-depth service. The amount of veterans in our area would take just about all the time of our County and State veteran service officers, just doing entitlement paperwork. Our objective was to form and be a part of a "Veterans Team" that would work together to solve veterans' problems.

Over the years that team grew to include numerous organizations that provide money, food and clothing donations along with other support. Early grants did not cover housing or feeding a

homeless veteran whom may arrive at our door on a late Friday afternoon. We would have to call a Board member or two to donate some money to put them up and feed them for the weekend. As our homeless clients grew it was necessary to address their needs in another manner. Fortunately, our County Veterans Service Officer, John Dorrity, started making calls to local veteran posts enlisting their assistance. Through his efforts, when we needed to feed or house a needy veteran, just like the cavalry, our vet posts came to the rescue. A hundred-dollar check or five hundred-dollar donations started to appear to help these vets and so on. This past year over two dozen veteran posts, auxiliaries and citizen groups donated over thirty thousand dollars to our homeless veteran program. One hundred percent of these donations went to help veterans. These organizations included four VFW posts, three American Legion posts and two of their auxiliaries, two DAV posts, three Marine Corp League Chapters and one chapter of the Ex Prisoners of War and the Military Order of the Purple Heart. Other organizations that assisted, included the Elks, Knights of Columbus, Beli System Pioneers, the Ocean County Mayors Association and the Cathedral of the Air (Lakehurst Naval Air Station Chaplains). The end result is that every veteran who needs help gets it, from our "Veterans Team".

In addition to monetary donations, we have received "in kind" donations in the form of office space and utilities from Lacey Township, New Jersey. In return, we take care of all municipal veterans problems that are referred to us and provide secretarial service to the local Veterans Commission. The County of Ocean has provided us with a vehicle, as has Ocean First Foundation. A local veteran bequeathed a van. We provide the County assistance on any veteran issue and working in conjunction with the local County veterans service officer on any in-depth projects. The provision of office space enables us to run our food bank and the vehicles allow us to provide the transportation for our veterans.

For the last sixteen years we have provided the above services by accessing grants available in most Counties including community development block grants, human services block grants, United Way and transportation grants along with grants that are indigenous to our location. Our Vetserve grant is a federal Housing and Urban Development grant (HUD). Recently we have been contracted by our County to provide veteran services and that has relieved us from some of the grant application process.

The veterans of Vetgroup realized early on that we could make a difference in our community by going after grants that are open to community groups. We are willing to assist any group who would like to try to do the same thing. These grants are basically taxpayers money and who has a better right to that money, than our veterans. We have utilized any assets available to us through local, County, State and Federal sources and the end result is that we never have a veteran in need who is not helped.

Vetgroup is currently located in Forked River, New Jersey and we have a grant application pending, to expand to northeastern Florida.

Vetgroup priority is given to combat veterans and no one is turned away. Recently, the needs of our older veterans are growing and it is disturbing to see a World War I Veteran sleeping in his car because his family no longer wants him or he can't afford rising rents. Nationally, the needs of our older veterans will continue to grow and resources will continue to shrink. Our Vice President, Gary Rieth summed it up for Vetgroup, "you cannot solve the problems in the world, or in the country, but you sure can make a difference in your neighborhood!"

That is our philosophy.

Thomas R. Waskovich