

Grass-roots group urges help for homeless vets

State, county leaders join effort to open shelter in Prince George's

by Joshua Garner | Staff Writer

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Ginger Miller pauses and tries to hold back tears when asked about what it was like being a homeless military veteran.

Miller, who served four years in the Navy until 1992, said she spent six months homeless in 1994 with her husband, a former Marine who served for four years until 1993, and her then-1-year-old son.

In May, after she lost her job, Miller decided to start John 14:2 Inc., a nonprofit advocating for homeless and at-risk veterans.

"When we got out of the military and lived with family, we had no place to go," said Miller, 39, who now has a home in Accokeek with her family.

She is joining other advocates to raise awareness about homeless veterans in Prince George's County, which has the highest population of veterans in the state and a high number of homeless veterans, according to the Maryland Department of Veterans Affairs.

The department, which doesn't keep exact statistics on homeless veterans statewide, unofficially estimates there are more than 2,500 homeless veterans in Prince George's County. A 2006 study by the National Coalition of Homeless Veterans found there are 3,300 homeless veterans in Maryland and 2,500 within the District.

The state veterans department estimates the county has nearly 70,000 veterans among 476,000 statewide. However, the only housing shelters, or transitional homes, that exist for veterans are outside the county, in Washington, D.C., and Baltimore, and are run by other nonprofit organizations that have received grants from the federal Department of Veterans Affairs.

Miller is in the process of applying for grants through the federal Department of Veterans Affairs Health Care for Homeless Veterans program to allow her to open a homeless shelter near Joint Base Andrews in Camp Springs. The name of John 14:2 Inc. is from a Bible passage she interprets to reflect the diverse needs of veterans.

Prince George's County Executive Jack B. Johnson (D), who served in the Army during the 1970s, said needs for veterans have increased at a time when the county has had to cut social services.

"Many veterans are now falling through the cracks," he said. "We have promised them things through their service, and in a sense we are not living up to these promises."

County Councilman Tony Knotts (D-Dist. 8) of Temple Hills, who served as a Marine in the 1970s, said there needs to be a discussion between government and nonprofit organizations to assist homeless veterans.

"We all have to come to the table to have some kind of responsibility so that we won't be duplicating efforts," he said. "Once we have a strategic plan, we can determine what can be done."

Regina Powell of Fort Washington is a veterans advocate who retired from the National Guard in 2001 after 26 years and is a member of the National Association of Concerned Veterans.

"A lot of homeless veterans in Prince George's County are put into facilities in Washington, D.C., or Baltimore," she said. "it's hectic to go back from D.C. to Baltimore."

Robert Sharps, director of the Maryland Department of Veterans Affairs, said the department does get calls about services for homeless veterans, although he said he could not discuss the number of calls.

"There is definitely a concern. We try to assist them in any way we can."

Sharps said the department can only refer veterans to centers that offer social services programs, such as the Family Services Center in Camp Springs. Homeless veterans are also able to receive housing vouchers through state and county programs run by the Department of Housing and Urban Development, which has housing vouchers specifically for veterans.

But Miller said veterans are often not vocal about homelessness. Many expect to be supported by their benefits upon retiring or being discharged from the military, she said. But benefits often take months to kick in and veterans often get buried under the paperwork that must be filed to receive them.

"You come home and you're promised all of these things, and the resources were not there. I felt helpless," she said.