

## Military vets have new resource center, place to call home



“We all want to do our best to truly link veterans up with the community when they return,” County Supervisor John Gioia said at the grand opening of the resource center. “You can tell when you walk into this building that it truly feels like home.” (Photo by: Tyler Orsburn)

By [Tyler Orsburn](#) Posted 4/16/13

A new resource center for homeless veterans to call home opened last week on the corner of Maine Avenue and Harbour Way South. Established by Rhonda Harris, the four bedroom two-story house with a white picket fence around it sits directly across the street from Nystrom Elementary School and can accommodate six veterans. The opening ceremony was attended by more than 25 people and included Secretary of the California Department of Veteran Affairs Peter J. Gravett, Mayor Gayle McLaughlin and Contra Costa County Supervisor John Gioia.

Eduardo Ramirez, a retired Air Force Master Sergeant and current U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs administrative officer for mental health and Minority Veterans Program coordinator in San Francisco said California has 2.2 million veterans and that many of them need a place to stay. “This is one of the few properties being converted to veterans’ housing,” he said.

Harris said she established the house and resource center in honor of her late father, Pvt. Harry L. Williams. He had post-traumatic stress disorder from the Korean War, she said. “Showing gratitude and love for our veterans, that’s what this is about,” Harris said during Thursday’s ceremony. “Loving them out of the situation, whatever that may be, so that they can get on a path of wholeness.”

According to Harris, three veterans now call the resource center a home and each pay \$600 per month to stay. Veterans can stay indefinitely until they get back on their feet, she said.

Jaime Garcia is one of those residents. Once homeless, the former Marine said he is now enrolled in Merritt College in Oakland where he will get certified to work as a drug and alcohol abuse counselor. “It’s not easy to have the choice to stop addiction,” he told those attending the grand opening. “[But] Rhonda is a caring person that empathizes with my feelings. She lets me know she’s concerned about my recovery and encourages me to make changes.”

Secretary Gravett said veterans sometimes don’t have a family or house to return to after their tour of duty, much less health care, employment and education opportunities. “It’s important when you have a facility like this that it’s not kept a secret in the veteran community,” Gravett said. “The entire city needs to know about this.”

Photographer and Vietnam War veteran Dedan Ji Jaga said he sympathizes with veterans that haven’t been able to benefit from their entitlements. “It took me 33 years to get my entitlement once I was separated from the military,”

he said, while standing in front of his photo exhibit of the 1982 opening of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. “The VA does a lot to help but they could do a lot more. As a bureaucracy the VA has a very fatalistic weapon that they use against veterans—and that’s frustration.”

Harris said she plans to open another veterans resource center, and will apply for a grant so she can hire an outreach person to reach those living in homeless encampments.

“The house and program is a model for good things to happen,” said Arthur Hatchett, executive director of the Greater Richmond Interfaith Program. “It’s an opportunity for [Richmond] veterans to be together and share common problems and solutions.”

*For more information about the Veterans Resource Program contact Rhonda Harris at (510) 778-8785 or (510) 593-6006.*