

# Richmond Confidential

## Program helps homeless veterans find shelter



Vietnam War veteran Ted Wilson has been living at the Veterans Resource Program since June. (Photo by: Mark Andrew Boyer)

By Mark Andrew Boyer

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Rhonda Harris was beaming when she arrived at the Veterans Resource Program with a rolling suitcase in tow. “We’ve got good news: We got \$4,000 for our mural,” she said with a fist pump. “It’s a grant – it’s our first grant!”

Harris unrolled a sketch of the mural by Air Force veteran Ann Reesman, which will honor military veterans from the Korean War, Vietnam and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. The mural will blanket the house’s eastern face. The money will come from arts grant awarded by the city of Richmond. It won’t cover the entire cost of the mural, but Harris hopes it will help her secure matching funds.

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The mural would be the most prominent display of welcome and gratitude emanating from the two-story house at the corner of Maine Avenue and Harbour Way South. The house, acquired in 2011, is a place where veterans can get information about filing benefits claims and finding help for PTSD and other wartime symptoms.

Providing housing for older veterans has been a major challenge for federal and local governments. The 2013 homeless count found 277 homeless veterans in Contra Costa County, about half of whom were unsheltered. Other organizations, like Shelter, Inc. of Contra Costa, also provide a place to live for veterans. But those groups aren't able to meet the needs of all area veterans, according to Harris.

"It's a major issue," she said. Harris estimates that more than 175 veterans have visited the house since it opened. The four-bedroom facility sleeps up to seven, providing temporary shelter for homeless veterans.

Five veterans are living in the home now, including Vietnam War veteran Ted Wilson, who is about to celebrate his first Veterans Day outside of prison in almost two decades. Wilson was released from San Quentin State Prison in June after serving 17 years on drug charges.

Awaiting a claim for military benefits, Wilson didn't have anywhere else to go. "She took me in without anything – just on my word," Wilson said. "If it wasn't for her, I'd probably be on the street, or I'd probably be back in prison."

Those who are financially stable are expected to pay rent and buy their own food. But Wilson and two other veterans are staying at the resource program for free. "I've had many who come here, who I've allowed to stay for no money," Harris says.

Wilson is looking forward to receiving his benefits and being able to pay rent. "I don't want to be a charity case. I've always paid my own way, and this is kind of new to me," he said. "I'm 64 years old, and I've taken care of myself since I was 16."

In prison, Wilson participated in a program called Veterans Healing Veterans from the Inside Out aimed at addressing combat-related emotional issues. That's where he met Harris.

Harris regularly attends meetings with veterans at San Quentin, and she says there are several inmates who want to live in the home upon their release. Once all the rooms at the Veterans Resource Program are filled and there is a wait list, Harris plans to open another house to accommodate more needy veterans others.

In the meantime, Harris is working on improving the two-story Victorian house and adding to the programs it offers. “We have quite a bit going on,” she said. PG&E recently selected the Veterans Resource Program for free energy-conservation retrofits. Harris is also in the process of filing for nonprofit status, and she is planning to expand her staff, which consists only of all volunteers now.

With all that’s happening in the run-up to Veterans Day, the mural is the thing Harris is most eager to talk about. “It will inform people that Richmond is for veterans, and that the resource program is a place where you can come and get your needs met.”