San Luis Obispo Stand Down May 18th & 19th, 2013

Frequently Asked Questions

What is a Stand Down? In times of war, exhausted combat units requiring time to rest and recover were removed from the battlefields to a place of relative security and safety. At secure base camp areas, troops were able to take care of personal hygiene, get clean uniforms, enjoy warm meals, receive medical and dental care, mail and receive letters, and enjoy the camaraderie of friends in a safe environment.
Today, Stand Down refers to a grassroots, community-based intervention program designed to help the nation's estimated 107,000 homeless/at risk veterans on any given night "combat" life on the streets. Homeless/at risk veterans are brought together in a single location for one to three days and are provided access to the community resources needed to begin addressing their individual problems and rebuilding their lives. In the military, Stand Down afforded battle-weary soldiers the opportunity to renew their spirit, health and overall sense of well-being. Today's Stand Down affords the same opportunity to homeless/at risk veterans.

What is the history of Stand Down? The concept of Stand Down, as related specifically to the homeless/at risk veteran crisis, was the brainchild of two Vietnam Veterans, Robert Van Keuren and Dr. Jon Nachison, with the support of Vietnam Veterans of San Diego. The first Stand Down was held in San Diego during the summer of 1988. The popularity of the event has steadily grown from the original in 1988 to 190 throughout the nation each year. It is estimated that in 2009 alone more than 42,000 homeless/at risk veterans received assistance at Stand Downs.

What happens at a Stand Down? Hundreds of homeless/at risk veterans are provided with a broad range of necessities including food, clothing, medical, legal and mental health assistance, job counseling and referral, and most importantly, companionship and camaraderie. It is a time for the community to connect with the homeless/at risk veteran population and address this crisis that affects each and every town, city and state in this country. The hand up -- not a handout -- philosophy of Stand Down is carried out through the work of hundreds of volunteers throughout the nation.

Why this unique approach? Many homeless/at risk veterans have suffered years of chronic or recurring readjustment issues since ending their military service, issues often inadequately addressed by traditional services to assist veterans. This is due in part to a lack of structured and effective collaboration among agencies, forcing veterans to go from one agency to another in efforts to access the various resources they need.
This lack of efficient support from traditional veteran services has led to homeless/at risk veterans' mistrust of the very government agencies and large institutions created to help them. A Stand Down brings together various agencies and service providers to provide a comprehensive system that encourages and assists homeless/at risk veterans to overcome their distrust and feelings of isolation with the knowledge that this event promises to address multiple problems at one time and place. It provides a safe environment in which they can connect with people who have shared experiences and cultivate hope that they can rebuild their lives.

Who organizes and delivers theses services? Hundreds of caring volunteers and professionals give of their time and expertise to address the unique needs of homeless/at risk veterans. Committees formed specifically to put on the event stage most Stand Downs. Veteran service organizations, National Guard and Reserve units, homeless/at risk shelter programs, health care providers, U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs and Labor staffs, veteran-helping-veteran programs, and concerned citizens from the community organize and stage the events.

Where are Stand Downs held? Stand Downs most often occur over a two- or three-day period, although there are an increasing number of one-day events. Some are held indoors, but the majority are held on football fields, in parks or other wide-open spaces.

What does it take to stage a Stand Down? There is no specific formula to plan and hold a Stand Down. In fact, each community adds its own uniqueness to a Stand Down. Some offer basic services, while others offer more by including entertainment and cultural activities to their programs. Some Stand Downs are re-created to follow a regimented, military-style program, which is familiar and comforting to the veteran, while others create an atmosphere of empowerment to the extent of electing officers among the homeless/at risk veterans.
All it really takes for a community to organize a Stand Down is a group of dedicated volunteers committed to helping homeless/at risk veterans improve their situation.

What can I do to help? Your contribution or volunteer time would be greatly appreciated by the local Stand Down committee. You might want to help organize a planning committee to assist the homeless/at risk veterans in your area. Please contact us for information concerning homeless/at risk veteran providers and advocates in your area.

Services Provided: Shelter provided throughout event; food; personal care (haircuts, personal care supplies, clothing); picture ID services; health care screening (HIV/AIDS, TB, Hepatitis C, etc.); health care services (actual health care professionals will provide services); eye care; dental care; VA benefits counseling; general benefits counseling (Social Security, Food Stamps, local health and human services); substance abuse counseling/recovery groups; mental health counseling; legal services; employment services (job referrals, employment counseling); housing services (referrals to programs); spiritual services; activities to empower homeless/at risk veterans and create a "community" (town meetings, tent leaders, open mike, entertainment, graduation...).