

## Serving Those Who Sacrificed for Us

Commissioner Hal Valeche

It is an honor to call myself a military veteran, having served as a Navy fighter pilot in the Vietnam War. My service required taking great risks and executing dangerous missions; however, I know that troops serving in ground combat experience a very different level of stress and uncertainty. Sadly, yet understandably, many combat veterans suffer severe emotional scars that contribute to struggles with addiction, mental illness, or homelessness.

The most recent manual count of homeless in Palm Beach County revealed a significant increase in homeless veterans. At least fifty percent of those veterans counted are over the age of 50, served in Vietnam, and have medical needs. I am working with County Human Resources and Veterans Services staff, along with our community service providers and the local Veterans Administration Medical Center in Riviera Beach (VA) to enhance our services to veterans and place them in housing.

The housing authorities in this county work with the VA to secure Veterans Affairs Supportive Housing (VASH) vouchers from the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), which currently help house more than 450 local veterans and their families. HUD will not release more vouchers without adequate social workers on staff with the VA to handle the cases. The Board of County Commissioners urged our U.S. Senators to support federal legislation to increase VA staffing and make more VASH vouchers available to our veterans, prompting the filing of Senate Bill S. 2750.

On January 3, the County Commission along with the Homeless and Housing Alliance kicked off our Functional Zero campaign to end veteran homelessness in Palm Beach County. Functional Zero is a coordinated and efficient community system designed to ensure that homelessness is rare, brief and non-recurring, and will require an organized approach of resources and programs. The goal of the campaign is to serve 100 veterans in 111 days.

Currently, Palm Beach County Veterans Services assists veterans in the areas of compensation and pensions, medical care, aid and attendant services, burial benefits, and documentation relating to homestead exemptions and income verification. This includes efforts to draw down \$4.5 million in annual benefits for veterans.

The rising cost of housing and the expiration of affordability restrictions on existing affordable housing is playing a huge role in the increase of homeless veterans. Palm Beach County recently approved HUD funding and impact fee credits to leverage private and non-profit investments for the construction of Village of Valor, a 148-unit rental development in Lake Worth. The Faith Hope Love Charity veteran organization is spearheading the project, where units will be available to very low to moderate-income persons with a priority given to veterans and their families, including the disabled, homeless, and those at-risk of homelessness.

Solutions require an ongoing partnership with government, service provider agencies and private industry. Another program offered in the county is S.M.A.R.T. Landlord, which recruits property owners to make efficiencies, studios and multiple bedroom units renting at or below Fair Market Value available to extremely low-income families and individuals. Participating in the program with homeless service providers offers the following benefits:

- **Support** – landlords support the community by offering housing at Fair Market Value

- **Marketing** – landlords save costs on marketing and advertising since there is a list of clients ready to move in
- **Assistance** – every tenant has a case manager who provides help to the client and is the landlord’s immediate point of contact
- **Rent** – landlords receive timely rent payments facilitated by the organization placing the tenant
- **Tenant** – landlords always have a tenant and this reduces vacancies

Additionally, the County plans to invest a portion of infrastructure sales tax dollars to retrofit surplus county properties into permanent supportive cottages for families.

For more information on homeless and veterans services in Palm Beach County visit <http://discover.pbcgov.org/communityservices/humanservices> and as always, if there is any way that my office can assist you, please contact me at (561) 355-2201 or by email at [hvaleche@pbcgov.org](mailto:hvaleche@pbcgov.org).