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Veterans show higher levels of distress than other homeless men in Minnesota

St. Paul -- About one in four homeless men in Minnesota is a military veteran, and one third of homeless veterans have served in a combat zone according to a new report from Wilder Research. Of particular note in the report are the high levels of distress among homeless veterans, particularly among veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan.

“In this study, we are beginning to see the first wave of vets from Iraq and Afghanistan among the homeless, and though a small number in the study, they show a much higher incidence of post traumatic stress than the overall veteran homeless population. Left untreated, post traumatic stress can increase the likelihood of homelessness,” said Greg Owen, study director. “These findings are consistent with a recent report by the Iraq Veteran Project that indicates that veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan are not only at significant risk for homelessness but are actually more likely to become homeless sooner than their predecessors following the Vietnam War.”

Kathy Vitalis, executive director, Minnesota Assistance Council for Veterans, said, “The study confirms what we are seeing at MACV as some of the major challenges returning veterans face that can lead to homelessness. In addition to increased cases involving post traumatic stress syndrome, these challenges include traumatic brain injury, unemployment, and getting caught in predatory lending practices that result in foreclosure. We must support these men and women as they work to return to productive lives of hope, dignity, and self-determination, in the nation they have defended.”

Who are homeless veterans?

On any given night, some 625 military veterans are homeless in Minnesota, down from about 700 in 2003. Ninety-five percent are male. Sixty-four percent of homeless veterans had served in the military for

more than two years, 31 percent in a combat zone. Close to three-quarters (70%) of the veterans surveyed had lived in Minnesota for more than five years; 46 percent had lived in Minnesota more than 20 years.

The average age of homeless male veterans is older than the overall homeless male population (age 47 compared to age 41). Over half of homeless veterans (53%) reported they were divorced or separated, and 34 percent reported having children under the age of 18 (13 percent of these parents had children with them).

Key findings:

High levels of distress; post traumatic stress higher among recently returned homeless veterans

Nearly half (48%) of homeless veterans reported having at least one chronic medical condition, and some 60 percent had a serious mental health problem, compared to 47 percent in 2003. More than half (54%) of homeless veterans considered themselves to be alcoholic or chemically dependent. Almost one-third (31%) reported having both a mental health and a chemical dependency problem, much higher than for the overall homeless population (19%). Forty percent of homeless veterans reported having had a service-related health problem, and of that group, 44 percent reported having had a serious health problem.

This study included 17 men who had recently returned from serving in Iraq or Afghanistan. This group was three times more likely than those in the general homeless population to report that they had been told by a doctor or nurse that they have post traumatic stress disorder, and 28 percent report traumatic brain injury.

Racial disparities persist

While less than 11 percent of the state's overall population is made up of persons of color, the survey found 42 percent of Minnesota's homeless veterans were persons of color. Particularly overrepresented were African Americans (37% in the Twin Cities metro area, 10% in greater Minnesota). However, these percentages are lower than in the 2003 study, when 44 percent of homeless veterans were African Americans in the Twin Cities metro area; 23 percent were African American in greater Minnesota. At 10 percent, American Indians were also overrepresented in greater Minnesota, similar to the 2003 study.

Full-time employment down from 2003

Although the percentage of homeless veterans who had completed high school was much higher than found in the general homeless population (92% for homeless veterans and 72% for the general homeless

population), the percentage of employed homeless veterans has declined from 36 percent in 2003 to 28 percent (20 percent full-time employment to 15 percent full-time employment). Over half (52%) reported that a physical, mental or other health condition limited the amount or type of work they could do.

“Homeless veterans face many of the same problems faced by other homeless adults, but they also represent a special concern because of their military service to the country and because of the moral compact that the Americans have with them to treat them with respect and dignity when their service is complete,” said Tim Marx, Commissioner of Minnesota Housing.

The report, Homeless veterans in Minnesota 2006, is based on information from the 2006 statewide study of homelessness conducted by Wilder Research in October every three years since 1991. Both reports, along with other information on homelessness, can be found at www.wilderresearch.org.

Wilder Research, part of the Amherst H. Wilder Foundation in Saint Paul, is one of the nation’s largest nonprofit research and evaluation centers dedicated to the field of human services. Wilder Research issues nearly 150 reports per year that help improve the community’s understanding of major social issues and identify effective ways to strengthen individuals, families and communities.

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