

My military experience:
Cassandra Flanagan

I enlisted in the United States Army in 1999 at the age of seventeen with a small suitcase in hand and my first duty station was Korea. Later, I was ordered to the 4th Infantry Division on Fort Hood, Texas. I deployed to Iraq the first time from a unit in that division. I received orders for Iraq a few months later, after reenlisting and being reassigned to Fort Drum, New York.

Once my term of service were completed in 2006, I returned home to Sicklerville, NJ (a suburb of Camden, NJ), with a DD214, a beautiful three year old daughter, a set of divorce papers, a host of latent internal writhes, and excitement about my new era in life mostly joy and excitement. I'm a veteran and I am going to use all my skill and talent to do something meaningful with myself. I decided to get an associate degree from the local community college, after graduating I was accepted at Temple University.

Why was it difficult to secure housing?

During those six years of college I rode my bicycle to school, worked odd jobs, had short term employment, begged teachers to bring my daughter to class, and ate ramen noodles. In general, I lived the life of a college student. I felt blessed and deeply grateful to have the Montgomery G.I. Bill at my disposal. Often times it was my sole documented source of income; one thousand plus dollars of tax free money awarded by the government on a monthly basis. I secured housing by begging rental managers and landlords to accept this as proof of income, I pouted with child in tow, brought in cash, set up furlough accounts and whatever other requirements property managers requested. Summer months were especially difficult, and I got in the habit of saving my income tax to pay rent during the summer months because the G.I. Bill rates are lower.

What suggestions do I have to improve outreach?

Before I found my way to the Philadelphia Veterans Multi-Service and Education Center (PVMSEC)

^ I did not have enough income

^ Disability and other government income cannot be claimed as income on finance assessment documents

^ No organization will help you until you have an eviction notice in hand.

What programs organizations or individuals helped you the most?

^ My mother, uncle and sister would baby sit for free while I worked odd jobs at odd times

^ The maintenance man at the apartment complex, Mr. Charles would bring me fish he caught in the ocean once a week (I include this because it really helped me get by, knowing the meat portion of the meal was already provided)

^ Scott Marcus and Associates legal team

^ Budgeting and bankruptcy

- ^ Financial education
- ^ Payment arrangements/ extensions fee for services

- ^ The Philadelphia Veterans Multi-Service and Education Center
 - ^ Case management
 - ^ Housing assistance-security, first, and last month' s rent
 - ^ Furniture assistance (Beds)
 - ^ Food Vouchers

^ Partnership and teamwork, at least locally. All the veteran service organizations should share a computer system or have monthly classes where they are all equally informed of what other organizations are experienced in providing veterans assistance. Maybe even an awareness of how many resources remain for the fiscal year, so veterans are given direction, even while being turned away from one organization. For example: I just found out there is a place in the next town over that has rooms for vets until they get themselves together. I'm not sure of the details but with all the organizations I spoke with and ineligible for someone should have informed me about this.

^ Veterans should be working at those places designed to assist veterans. However unintentional, the attitude of most civilians towards veterans (specifically when the veteran is expressing a need) is very discouraging and damaging to the mental health and emotional state of ex-warriors.

^ Organizations should have a clear process that is typed up and given to the veteran. Step 1, 2, 3... Etc, with approximate time frames. Confusion comes when the process is not understood. You feel like you are waiting forever, no one has answers.

^ Company travel or a car that is shared will help case managers assist and assess individuals without putting extra burdens on the veteran.

Often, the programs have unrealistic expectations/rule of homeless or nearly homeless veterans. You have to call them once a week or attend a meeting once a week. I don't have rent money; I'm struggling to buy food and clothing for my child, not to mention maintaining transportation fares bus, train, taxi etc. I have no phone, except when I go to work and I'm not really suppose to use that one for personal calls. It's not that I am lazy or undisciplined; I simply don't have the means. With this in mind:

^ Complete furniture assistance would be a good help or provision to the assistance I received through SSVF. I was lucky to work with PVMSEC as they anticipated and assisted me with furniture. I am completely grateful for what I have received. However, I know it would improve the lives of future veterans if receiving housing assistance did not automatically disqualify the recipient from receiving other services, specifically those that can help the veteran maintain new housing. I was relocated to another state to avoid homelessness. The circumstance left me isolated from my support system, and unable to secure employment in my new location.

^ Employment services and training should remain available after receiving housing assistance.

Overall, PVMSEC was the only organization that truly helped me secure affordable housing. When I met with the project coordinator, Jack Ries and my case manager, Aronda Smith for the first time I felt appreciated and respected. I instantly knew I was speaking with fellow veterans. I was rapidly assisted with all my needs. They felt my urgency and sense of abandonment and matched it. Everything went quickly and smoothly. Whenever I have a question or need advice concerning veteran issues I call my

case manager. I visit the center when I need a hot meal and am short on groceries. It truly feels like a home away from home.

WHO WE ARE – WHAT WE DO

THE PHILADELPHIA VETERANS MULTI-SERVICE & EDUCATION CENTER

Services and programs are diversified in scope with an individualized approach. They include:

Veteran Benefit / Entitlement Assistance: PVMSEC employs two full time accredited Veteran Service Officers possessing experience and in-depth knowledge of the VA system. One is a Vietnam Veteran and one an Iraq Veteran. Last fiscal year 348 Individual Veterans were assisted resulting in 1.5 million dollars of VA compensation.

Employment and Training Services: Designed with the current job market in mind, allowing Veterans the ability to acquire the necessary skills to compete for demanding positions and to earn a livable wage. Funded through the Department of Labor, last fiscal year 216 individual Veterans were trained and 153 were placed in employment.

- As a component of training, PVMSEC also has an Incarcerated Veteran Training Program and attends Philadelphia Veterans Court every Friday and works with the Philadelphia VA Medical Center Veterans Justice Outreach Representative.
- This year the National Coalition for Homeless Veterans (NCHV) identified PVMSEC as a Department of Labor, Homeless Veterans Reintegration Program “Best Practices” agency. This was based on a NCHV collection of successful HVRP profiles from across the country, including a wide range of market models.

Homeless Veteran Services: Since our beginning in 1980, PVMSEC has provided assistance to homeless Veterans and Veterans in danger of this life situation. Services have expanded, providing a full continuum for homeless Veterans. Components include:

- *The Perimeter*, a homeless day service center operating as a “stand down” five days a week, last fiscal year had 16, 337 Veteran encounters providing 72,474 service hours.
- *LZ II*, a 95 Bed male transitional housing residence, served 210 male homeless Veterans last fiscal year.
- *The Mary E. Walker House*, a 30 bed female transitional housing residence, served 59 homeless women Veterans last fiscal year.
- *Shelter Plus Care*, 30 Units of HUD subsidized housing for Veterans only, provided 33 Veterans with subsidy, supportive services and case management.
- *Supportive Housing Program*, 10 Units of HUD subsidized housing for Veterans only, provided 11 Veterans with subsidy, supportive services and case management.
- *Supportive Services for Veterans and Families (SSVF)*: VA funded support grant that assisted 115 Veterans and Veteran families with housing services; placed 63 homeless Veterans/families into permanent housing; and 52 Veterans/families received homeless prevention services
- *Homeless Prevention and Rapid Re-Housing*; awarded to us by the City of Philadelphia from its federal *American Recovery and Re-investment Act* initiative funding to work exclusively with Veterans during the three year period of grant commitment. 319 individuals and families were placed in housing.

Veterans Transition Assistance: Freedom and Honor, is a transitional training program with a focus on those Veterans struggling with combat stress and readjustment issues resulting from one or more deployments in Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF), Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF), and other military operations. To date the Freedom and Honor team has conducted over 60,000 hours of training to more than 7,000 Veterans across 19 states

Additional On-site Resources: Over the past 32 years, PVMSEC has established a wide range of community partnerships and increased our efforts to provide the most current and sought after resources for Veterans within our agency.

- PA CareerLink (A Veteran Employment Specialist)
- Philadelphia VA Medical Center Social Work staff

- Philadelphia VA Regional Office Representative (Benefits and Entitlements)
- Homeless Advocacy Project (legal services)
- Weekday shuttle service to and from the Phila. VA Medical Center and local shelters
- Philadelphia VA homeless outreach team
- Emergency food and clothing
- Open Computer Lab (Internet job site assistance)
- Internet employment application assistance