

Veterans NEWS

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Southern Alberta

Homes For Heroes Foundation

A registered Canadian charity has taken the concept of housing at-risk military veterans and converted it into results that are changing lives and setting new standards for rehabilitation and social services.

Homes For Heroes Foundation, created in response to thousands of veterans struggling with mental health, addictions, and homelessness, is building tiny house villages across Canada with wrap-around services like counselling and job training to help veterans transition back to independent living. The foundation, which has graduated 13 veterans so far, operates villages in Edmonton and Calgary with build plans in Kingston and Winnipeg. A total of eight villages are planned in Canada.

"This is incredibly important work, and no one else is really doing the

combination of providing housing as well as the social services hope."

support that our Canadian Forces veterans so desperately need," said Homes for Heroes Director of Village Operations Kyle Clapperton, who is also commanding officer of the Royal Regina Rifles, a Primary Reserve infantry regiment of the Canadian Forces. "There are gaps in services for veterans, and sometimes it's just unfortunate circumstances that bring them to us. Being able

to support homeless or housing-insecure veterans that have fallen on hard times, and now don't have a roof over their head is unique. Being able to support them in a transition

Homes For Heroes villages consist of 15 to 25 ATCO-built tiny homes facing inwards in park-like settings that facilitate comradery and peer-to-peer support. The homes are equipped with full amenities. Villages have a central resource centre, counselling office and community garden.

"Homelessness comes in many different forms," said Clapperton, adding many veterans have experienced occupational stress injuries that cause post traumatic

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stress disorder and other mental health problems. "There are people you wouldn't easily recognize as homeless. Homelessness can result from not being able to pay rent or losing a job or relationship, and now they're finding alternate housing arrangements that might be a vehicle or a friend's couch. There's a lot of hidden homelessness in Canada, and the pandemic and economic situation aren't helping." According to Government of Canada statistics, veterans account for approximately 4.4 per cent of homeless people. Homeless veterans tend to be older, with an average age of 48, than non-veterans' average age of 39, and are more likely to be male – 82.7 per cent – compared to 62.7 per cent of non-veterans.

One Homes for Heroes volunteer is determined to push back against the statistics.

Twenty-eight-year Army veteran Mark Hutchings, chairperson of the foundation's Kingston Volunteer Development Team, said the organization attracts great volunteers and employees because helping at-risk veterans is a noble effort. He has asked hundreds of people in the community for help with time and money. Only one person has declined. Multiple levels of government and major donors are stepping up to make the Kingston tiny home village a reality.

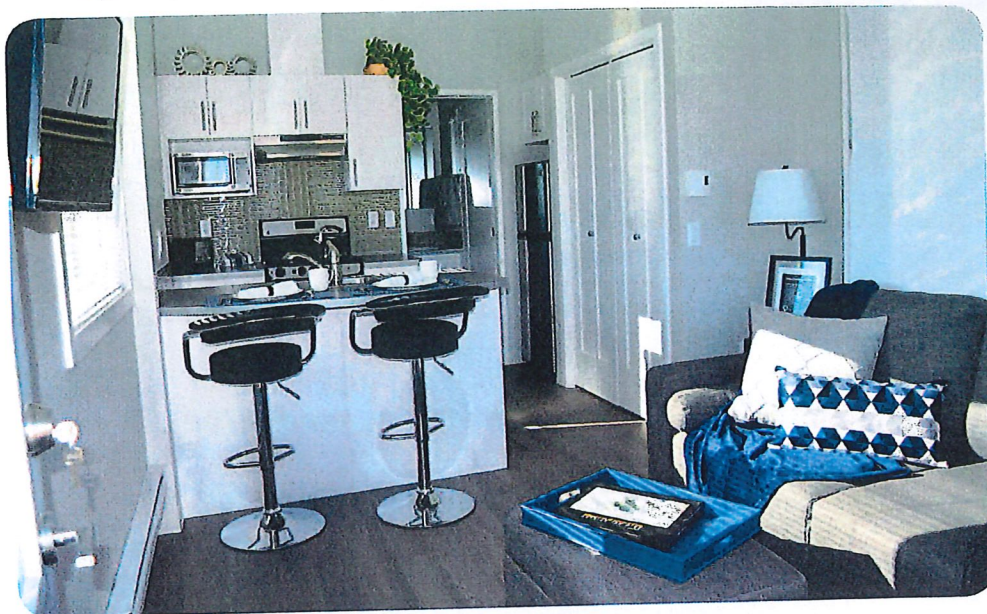
"We've been producing veterans since Canada was a new nation," he said. "We had more than 40,000 armed forces members serve in Afghanistan between 2001 and 2014. But when you had one million men return from service in the Second World War, the government paid attention and provided services.

Government hasn't had that kind of priority for three decades at least, and the services provided to damaged

veterans coming home are hard to get. They are badly administered. Most people, including veterans, don't know the programs exist. We've got those veterans across the country, possibly 5000 of them homeless, which is shocking to me. In Kingston, at any given time, there are 45 homeless veterans."

According to the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness, a research institute devoted to homelessness, there are approximately 629,300 veterans living in Canada. Of those, an estimated 32 per cent face problems transitioning from military to civilian life, putting them at risk of mental illness, addictions, and homelessness. Veterans make up around 2.2 per cent of Canada's homeless shelter population.

With 10 years' experience working with homeless people, Homes for Heroes Calgary Program



Manager Kendahl Cowan said the foundation's housing-first model ensures veterans are properly sheltered so they can effectively work towards life goals and better health. Housing, she explained, is a basic human right.

"We don't place expectations on the individuals who are accessing the program," she said. "We first provide the stability and safety of a home before starting work on other goals. Working on those goals, like addictions and the mental health, gets a lot easier when you have a stable home base."

Cowan decided to work with Homes for Heroes because the foundation is unique and innovative. She isn't

aware of another program based on tiny homes. She likes the fact the Calgary village was able to transform and beautify an empty space. The tiny homes provide immediate independence to veterans, making program access easier and enhancing quality of life.

Veterans can face an uphill battle when trying to access Veterans Affairs Canada programs, which Cowan says have a red tape problem. "It's not an easy system to access or engage with," she said. "There are also challenges with a lack of funding for veterans."

The efforts of Cowan, Hutchings, Clapperton and many other Homes for Heroes staff and volunteers are paying a dividend of hope.

Former King's Own Calgary Regiment Reservist Darrin, 59, said being a Homes for Heroes tenant has changed his life. He would be homeless, living in a shelter, if not for the foundation. He's much happier now and is laughing more often with his co-residents. He also feels a sense of pride in being a former reservist, and one day wants to open a hobby shop.

"As soon as I moved in here, I loved the place," he said. "All of the buildings, the courtyard, the recreation centre, and the resource centre are very nice. And all the units, very nice and modern. We have a community here. Guys talk to each other outside on the steps. So, we are kind of social here with each other."

Home For Heroes tenant and former Ordnance Corps member Jim, 78, describes himself as one of the higher functioning people in the Calgary tiny house village. He doesn't access most of the wrap-around services coordinated by the foundation and has active friendships outside Homes for Heroes. He served nine years in the Ordnance Corps, not enough to qualify for a pension. Affordability is what brought him to the village.

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"In order to get a pension from the forces, you must have served a minimum of 12 years, and I wasn't in 12 years," he said. "So, I have no pension or anything like that. I basically live on Old Age Security and Canada Pension. I was living with my son, and he moved to Vancouver, so I was out of a place to live. So, I went to Homes for Heroes and qualified. I've been here for a year and three months."

Jim, who is an executive member at the local Royal Canadian Legion, said life in the village is peaceful and quiet. The foundation, he explained, works hard to place the right people in the communities. He said residents are required to "behave themselves." At 78, Jim is one of the oldest Homes for Heroes tenants.

"They look after us well here," he said. "We don't go hungry or anything like that. The Veterans Food Bank is always here to look after us if we need it. There are some residents here that have nurses come two or three times a day. And some people are unable to get out their homes because of disability. There are two homes designed for wheelchairs. The people here are nice. Tomorrow we are having a meeting and it's a community barbeque."

Jeff, 49, has been a Homes for Heroes tenant for three weeks. Recently divorced, he was facing homelessness even though he is employed, and on sick leave, with a railway company. He's the only tenant in his village with a car, so he's been helping some of his new friends with transportation. He credits Homes for Heroes with

saving his life.

"Let's get the story out there," said the 20-year Army veteran, adding his time in the Canadian Forces brought hardship later in life. "Now I've got a roof over my head. I've got food in the fridge. I'm good to go. Any problem I have I can get help. They've got it covered. There's a social worker here most of the time. And let's face it, there are a bunch of highly trained veterans here, so if there's a problem someone will know CPR. So, yeah, this place has saved my life. I have a job and I want to get back to work."

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