

LOCAL



Fred and Ellen Keaton, of Philadelphia, enjoy a meal at the Delaware Valley Stand Down in Bristol Township.

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INTELLIGENCER

‘A hand up, not a handout’

Civilian and military volunteers have come together in Bucks County this weekend to assist homeless and struggling veterans at the 21st Delaware Valley Stand Down.

By **ANDY VINEBERG**
STAFF WRITER

Sometimes, Malcolm Ruffin sleeps at a friend’s house. Sometimes, a park.

The Philadelphia native served 12 years in the Army (1976-87), including overseas tours in Germany and Korea, and he

brought the horrors of working as a medic in the operating room home with him. The ensuing years have seen him deal with drug addiction, unemployment, petty crimes and homelessness.

“After I got out, I wasn’t the same,” the handsome, well-spoken, 50-something said Saturday afternoon, sitting on a cot under a white tent. “I was able to come back to work, but I still had trouble fitting back in. In time, I got compensated, but I was in and out of treatment facilities. I started using drugs to cope with the symptoms.”

“My family, they didn’t understand. I

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wasn't verbalizing it, telling them anything. I didn't go to the VA (Veterans Affairs). I continued living with it, dealing with it. Sometimes you don't want anyone to know how it is, because you don't know how it is.

"I went through 26 hospital jobs in three different states in 10 years. I'd clean up to get the jobs, but I couldn't keep the jobs because of my addictions."

Ruffin, who said his last day of employment was July 6, 2006, is one of 300-some struggling veterans — homeless or otherwise — attending the Delaware Valley Stand Down this weekend in Bristol Township. The three-day event, now in its 21st year (and fifth at its current location adjacent to the Bucks County government office building), provides veterans with food, shelter, medical care and screenings, education, employment opportunities, legal assistance, VA enrollment and benefits counseling, fresh clothing, showers, entertainment and more.

The veterans, who are housed in a military-style tent-city encampment, are aided by hundreds of military and civilian volunteers, many of whom, such as Kathy Craige, of Churchville, have worked at Stand Down for years.

"We run into some guys that frankly don't want to go to the hospital. They don't know how to engage the VA," said Craige, associate chief nurse for ambulatory and special care at the Philadelphia VA. "So this is an opportunity where they have peers, they can come in and feel comfortable, they can engage us in any way that meets their needs.

"We sometimes see guys, they've kind of lost their way, and often it's friends and family members that hear about Stand Down and talk them into coming. It starts them off on a journey. One of the things that's nice about this weekend is that a lot of the volunteers have actually come through Stand Down and have needed the services and now can come back and tell (others) how the VA was able to help them."

A formerly homeless Marine Corps veteran who asked only to be identified by his first name, Ulysses, was not officially one of the volunteers. But he has never missed a Stand Down and considers himself an adviser to the younger attendees.

"I teach them how to act, tell them our experiences, what we went through and what's been going on," said Ulysses, 66, of Philadelphia, who served in Vietnam from 1965-67. "They don't know what us older veterans have been through."

Ulysses said his struggles did not begin until the 1970s when his marriage went bad, he lost his home and job at the Philadelphia Department of Recreation and he began suffering nightmares — a downward spiral that continued into the 1990s.

"I found myself having dreams so vivid you could almost taste them," said Ulysses, who eventually moved in with his mom in Upper Darby and now lives in a senior home. "I think about what I went through, it keeps me humble, man. I can never think of myself as being great. I crawled on the same ground as these guys did, in more ways than one."

For the volunteers who have never suffered from homelessness or similar hardships, the chance to help American heroes get back on their feet was more

than enough incentive to brave the oppressive heat and grueling workload.

Glenn Umberger, of Schwenksville, a captain in the Army Reserve and a Desert Storm vet, has volunteered at Stand Down for 15 years, the last 11 on the kitchen committee. He and his crew were responsible for seven meals this weekend.

"It's a very long weekend, but a very rewarding weekend," Umberger said Saturday afternoon after grilling between 400 and 500 hamburgers and about 350 hot dogs. "I'm fortunate enough to be able to bring a couple of soldiers along from my reserve unit, and for a lot of them, this is their first time here. By the time they get done the weekend, they're exhausted, hot and tired, but they always say, please sign me up for next year."

Civilian volunteer Bob "Pig Man" Emery, of Valley Forge, arrived at Stand Down at 5 a.m. Saturday, and was in charge of roasting five full-sized, 120-pound pigs for dinner. The process would take about eight hours.

"They've (the veterans) fought for me, the least I can do is give them a little of my time," Emery said.

Umberger said the experiences at Stand Down are often heartbreaking.

"About two years ago there was a young Iraqi Freedom vet, approximately 23, and as he's going through the line he broke down and started crying because he didn't believe there were people out here who actually cared about him and were considerate enough to take their time and come out and (help him)."

Bobbi Speller, of Pennel, whose husband, Ed, is the executive director of Stand Down, helps welcome the veterans as they're

dropped off from buses, and she provides them with "whatever they need to get through the weekend" — backpacks, toiletries, socks, underwear, shower shoes, baseball caps, T-shirts. All but the T-shirts are donated.

"It is like a family," she said. "Every year we wait for people to come back — you get to know them. When someone hasn't been here, you wonder about them. You hope they've gotten themselves together rather than being in worse shape."

Stand Down, which "wouldn't be here without the Bucks County commissioners," according to media and public affairs chairman Jerry Jonas, welcomed a high-profile guest on Friday in Robert A. McDonald, recently named U.S. secretary of Veterans Affairs.

"We've got to work on serving veterans and improving veteran satisfaction with the services we provide," McDonald said Friday. "That's the ultimate goal — looking at every issue through the eyes of veterans, not through our eyes. That's what really counts."

The overriding theme of the weekend was described by volunteer Joe Bean, of Rolling Thunder Charities, as "a hand up, not a hand-out." While some veterans were likely there for the free food and clothes and nothing more, others, like Ruffin, seemed genuinely determined to turn their lives around.

"You can't continue to run away," he said. "If you don't put yourself out there for change and follow up on it, nothing changes. Sometimes, we're all about getting handouts. Not that we're not deserving, but once you get help you've got to make something out of it. I'm responsible for me."

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