

AFTER THE FIRE

Operation Stand Down Nashville readies soldiers to return to daily life

BY CHUCK RAINEY

Just down from the Gulch, at 1125 12th Ave. S., you'll find the home of Operation Stand Down Nashville (OSDN). The 501 (c) 3 nonprofit is driven by the passion and caring of Bill Burleigh, the executive director, and an amazing staff who spend their days helping honorably discharged veterans find their place in society. They focus on homeless vets and their families, hoping to see each individual flourish as a self-sufficient, independent and productive member of the community.

"We're about the whole person," Burleigh says, emphasizing the organization isn't tunnel-visioned. "We serve the needs of veterans with legal help, homeless support, drug and alcohol addiction problems, temporary lodging while in a recovery program and, most of all, with finding and maintaining employment. The Veterans Administration (VA) can't do all of that.

"When individuals enter our facility, they're immediately treated as a valuable and respected member of society. They feel the time spent here is worthwhile. We are veterans serving veterans and our first answer is 'yes,'" he continues.

OSDN recently moved to a larger facility, expanding their scope and reach out to Nashville's homeless veterans. The office can now serve not only individuals, but whole families. They even provide a mailing address for those currently homeless to help them obtain jobs.

"We are the face of the VA, and can get veterans the help they need more easily. We walk them through the process, and help them understand, because *we* understand it and

know how to help," says Burleigh.

OSDN began as a single event in 1993. It's since grown with support from grants and through networking with agencies and departments that provide services for veterans. Now the new board of directors is reaching out to the community.

"The board has been restructured in the past year to bring in members from various career paths to diversify and reach a deeper connection with the city," explains Bob Tuke, OSDN president. Members were actually called and asked to serve on the board. One of those calls got Tuke more involved. "This is where the boot meets the trail," he says. "OSDN is doing great things and I'm just proud to be a part."

In June, the new location hosted a legal "stand down," helping more than 100 veterans with the legal issues preventing them from finding employment, securing housing and moving on toward becoming tax-paying members of the community.

"Our main focus today is getting homeless veterans employed," says Burleigh. "Through cooperation with AMVETS, we have a computer lab with 10 systems for veterans to use to find and take correspondence courses. We recently received a grant for newly discharged veterans to obtain training in green jobs. In a partnership with the state of Tennessee, Fort Campbell and the Actus Foundation, veterans will receive a completion certificate from Tennessee State University. This sort of thing is changing lives."

OSDN offers a housing program for vets



Mary Ross and Col. Bill Burleigh

recovering from substance abuse. Currently, they have seven houses (two for women, five for men) where residents can find help, hope and community, using the 12-step Alcoholics Anonymous system.

“You can’t do it alone,” says Burleigh. “It takes a community to create change.” Their system has a better than 60 percent recovery rate.

The service center employment program focuses on sustained employment and self sufficiency. “We don’t call it a success until the individual has been working nine months,” explains Burleigh.

OSDN has been given two grants by the Department of Labor, and they are considered a best practice facility.

The next local Stand Down event will be held Oct. 22-24 at 1164 Foster Ave., at the old Tennessee Preparatory School gymnasium. Last year more than 400 veterans spent a weekend

getting legal help, medical attention, homeless support, food, shelter and a sense of community. More than 125 organizations were involved in the event actively or as sponsors, helping to get homeless veterans back on their feet.

OSDN accepts donations during all business hours and you can donate on line at osdnashville.org.

“We’re gratefully spending the money that someone else earned to help our veterans,” says Burleigh. “We’re serious about that reality and are proud of our financial stability.”

“Ninety percent of our spending goes directly toward those we serve and only 10 percent covers administrative costs,” says Tuke.

There’s no better way to help out veterans than to support OSDN. The facility serves between 75 and 100 veterans daily and can use your support.