

'Vets looking out for vets' at center.

East St. Louis facility offers aid for residents

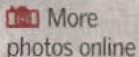
BY MIKE FITZGERALD
News-Democrat

EAST ST. LOUIS — One afternoon a few weeks ago, Leonard Demming, 52, walked into the dining room of his new home and poured himself a cup of coffee.

Next to the coffee pot, scrawled on a nearby blackboard, were two messages. Each in its own way summed up the philosophy behind the Joseph Center, the 26-bed shelter for homeless veterans that opened in November.

The first message, about operating the automatic coffee maker, was purely pragmatic: "5 scoops per pot."

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The second message took a longer, more spiritual view:

"God gives us enough grace for whatever we face."

Those two messages — one of self-help, the other of faith in a better future — resonated powerfully for Demming, who moved into the shelter in early January after losing his job and apartment in St. Louis.

The center has provided him with a long-term refuge where he can recharge his mental batteries, get needed medical help and obtain the training required for a job that brings in other things besides a paycheck: dignity, self-esteem, pride.

Even better, Demming said, it provides him with a chance to live and work with people on his wavelength: fellow vets.

"They got vets looking out for vets, so that's cool," said Demming, who served in the U.S. Army in the 1970s. "There are a lot of guys I can relate to in here."

The center at 5020 State St.



DERIK HOLTSMANN/*News-Democrat*

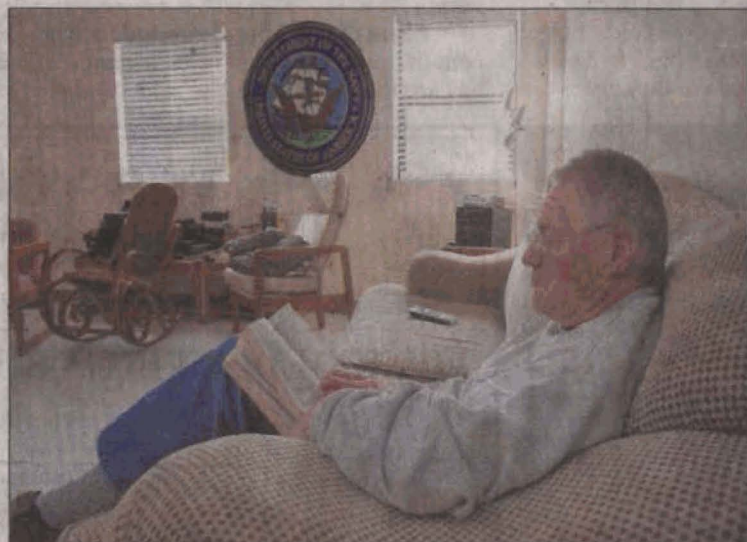
Leonard Demming prepares a cup of coffee in the multipurpose room at the Joseph Center.

opened late last year with the help of \$2 million in state and federal grants and loans. The largest grants came from the U.S. departments of Veterans Affairs and Housing and Urban Development.

In less than two months, the shelter has become home to 19 residents, who were referred to the program through VA hospitals in St. Louis and around Illinois.

Here the residents take part in counseling for drug and alcohol problems, in addition to the job skills and community college classes they enroll in, which are provided by VA facilities in St. Louis and St. Louis County.

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Michael Fowler relaxes in the lounge at the Joseph Center.

CENTER | Veterans live at ESL facility

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For Army veteran Michael Fowler, 52, the Joseph Center has provided an important time-out away from the social influences that worsened his battles with depression and alcohol.

"I'm glad I found out about this place because this is what I need to get back," said Fowler, who was referred to the center by a social worker at the VA hospital in Danville.

The center's relative isolation makes a difference because "I wanted to get to some place where I didn't know anybody," he said. "That way I can pick the positive people that I need to be around."

The maximum length of each resident's stay is two years, but most won't need that much time before moving out, said Martha Watts, the center founder, who named the facility after her late husband, Joseph Watts.

"Their length of time will depend on what they need to accomplish during the time that they're here," said Watts, the president of Eagles Nest of St. Clair County, the not-for-profit which oversees the shelter. "Everybody here won't need two years to get back on their feet."

Watts' guiding philosophy regarding center residents is simple.

"I just try to make each one feel important while they're here," said Watts, a retired VA psychiatric nurse who shepherded the center into existence after a nearly decade-long struggle.

Watts said she makes it her "business to spend time with them each day talking with them, and talking about what's going on with them in their lives."

Center residents are kept as busy as possible. In the morning, they wake up early and meet for a prayer,

then eat breakfast cooked up by a resident who in an earlier life had worked as a restaurant chef.

Then everyone boards buses for St. Louis, where they spend most of the day in getting job training and medical care at the VA hospitals in downtown St. Louis and at Jefferson Barracks in South St. Louis County.

In the evenings back at the Joseph Center, the residents take part in more meetings, with about an hour of down time before bed to watch TV, read or hang out with Mends.

Bobby Williams, 51, a former Marine, credited Watts' encouragement and motherly approach with helping him stay sober after decades fighting drugs and alcohol.

"She's always talking to us. And she tries to stay on us guys," Williams said. "She's a caring person. I like that."

Watts' caring attitude really pays off most in the mornings, when residents are feeling most uptight and worried about their futures, Demming said.

"She'll say, 'C'mon, take it easy. Just relax. And do the thing one day at a time,'" he said.

Comprehensive care centers — which provide a safe, long-term home and a full spectrum of training and counseling opportunities — are increasingly becoming the standard for homeless veterans nationwide, said Bob Adams, the president and co-founder of the Midwest Shelter for Homeless Veterans, in Wheaton, a five-bed facility that opened in 2007.

"Maybe the most important thing is they come home to their own lives again. They get a chance to get their legs underneath them again," said Adams, a Vietnam veteran. "They get to feel a part of, instead of a part from."

Combat veterans are es-

pecially vulnerable to homelessness because of the emotional problems that come from post-traumatic stress disorder, a psychiatric condition resulting from life-threatening experiences. PTSD's symptoms include anxiety, depression, nightmares and flashbacks.

Veterans suffering from it often self-medicate with the help of drugs or alcohol, upping the likelihood they'll lose their jobs and homes, cut themselves off from their families and wind up in jail or on the streets.

Nationwide, an estimated 130,000 veterans are homeless at any given time, with twice that number estimated to be homeless during any given year, according to VA statistics.

The traditional problem of homeless veterans are being fed by new strains resulting from the multiple deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan that military personnel have repeatedly endured, according to Adams.

"I went once. Once was enough," said Adams, who served in Vietnam in 1968 as a Navy corpsman with a Marine rifle platoon.

Because of the military's multiple deployment policy, "You never really come home completely because you know you have to go back. You never settle into family life," Adams said. "You feel different and distant ... And I think that wears on people psychologically."

Adams compared America's looming problem of homeless veterans to Hurricane Katrina, which devastated the Gulf Coast in 2005.

"We know it's coming, but we just don't see it yet," he said. "But when it hits, it's going to be absolutely amazing."

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