



LOS ANGELES

# Daily Journal

## Professionals Can Collaborate to Fight Homelessness

**By Jon Killoran**  
November 11, 2015

Forty-five years after returning from Vietnam, Specialist James Perkins (not his real name) is still fighting for safety, stability and peace. He returned home struggling with mental disabilities that did not yet have names and bearing invisible wounds from a war that no one wanted to talk about. Post traumatic stress rooted in trauma and schizophrenia made it difficult to hold down a job. For most of the past 40 years, he has lived on the streets or in homeless shelters.

Los Angeles Mayor Eric Garcetti has pledged to end veteran homelessness. With 4,363 veterans sleeping on the streets or in shelters every night, Los Angeles County has more homeless veterans than anywhere else in the country. Too many of them, like Perkins, are chronically homeless, living on the streets for years and struggling with severe mental health disabilities.

While the situation is discouraging, there are signs of hope. Homelessness overall has risen in Los Angeles County by 12 percent over the past two years, but the number of homeless veterans in the County fell by 5.5 percent. Los Angeles is taking more steps to house its veterans.

Between January and June of this year, 3,733 homeless veterans moved into housing. The mayor and city council recently proposed to increase spending on housing and services for people who are homeless by \$100 million annually. The county board of supervisors has also pledged additional money.

For chronically homeless veterans like Perkins, an integrated approach that couples housing with wraparound services is needed. Since October 2013, the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs has partnered with Inner City Law Center to pioneer an integrated medical legal partnership at the West Los Angeles Medical Center. This clinic provides a one-stop shop for homeless veterans seeking care. When Perkins first enrolled in the partnership clinic he was living on the streets, but his spirits were high. He was determined to find a means to support himself, satisfy his most basic needs, and maybe even buy a new suit.

As a patient in this clinic, Perkins meets with his primary care provider, social worker, psychologist, housing case manager, peer support specialist, and public interest lawyer, all in one place, all on the same day. Just as important, these professionals communicate with

one other to ensure Perkins' ultimate goals — healthcare, a stable income, and stable housing — are achieved.

Nearly 300 hospitals and health centers nationwide now employ a medical legal partnership model, where health care teams work alongside civil legal aid lawyers. This multidisciplinary, team-oriented approach to healthcare allows clinicians to address the underlying cause of illness, and prevent legal problems from escalating to where they might become detrimental to a patient's health.

So what does this interdisciplinary team look like in action? Perkins met regularly with his health care team members for talk therapy and medication management. A housing case manager helped him obtain VA housing. After initially denying Perkins disability benefits, a public interest lawyer appealed the decision. Perkins won, and was granted benefits — including retroactive benefits to make up for the years without benefits he spent in the appeals process.

When Perkins received notice that he had prevailed in his appeal, he sat down with his team to discuss his future. With the help of his peer support specialist, he enrolled in the VA's payee program to help

## Professionals Can Collaborate to Fight Homelessness—continued

manage his new disability benefits. He now lives in his own apartment and continues to meet monthly with his care team at the VA. His short-term goal is to move into an apartment in a safer neighborhood and his long term goal is to relocate to Texas to be closer to his family. In the meantime, he gets to go suit shopping.

At 67 years old and after 40 years of homelessness, Perkins' struggle for stability is far from over. He is finally receiving compensation for the traumas he experienced as a young soldier in Vietnam so long ago. But his disabilities continue to impact him. He will continue to have both good and bad days.

What will remain constant, however, is the medical-legal team that surrounds him: a doctor, a social worker, a public interest lawyer, and many others who are committed to helping him meet his needs and confront and remove any and all obstacles that threaten his newfound stability.

For chronically homeless veterans like Perkins who have complex medical, mental health and legal issues, a diverse team of professionals working collaboratively can pave a path to safety, stability, and peace — even for our veterans who have been waiting and struggling the longest.

*Jon Killoran is a staff attorney with Inner City Law Center's Homeless Veterans Project and was the founding attorney of the Medical-Legal Partnership at the West Los Angeles Veterans Medical Center.*

