

Working quietly and effectively for jobs for Vietnam vets

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SANTA CRUZ — While much of the nation recently paid homage to American servicemen who were killed in Vietnam with an elaborate (and controversial) memorial in Washington, a quieter force here in Santa Cruz continued to provide help for those soldiers who survived.

Behind the mirrored windows and gray stone facade of the Front Street Veteran's Building, three independent county and state-run agencies work hand-in-hand with one another so effectively that veterans groups nationwide are starting to take notice.

"For a variety of reasons, this particular area has an extremely high density of Vietnam Vets," said Robert Lee Shippen, vice president of the United Veterans Council. "It's estimated that anywhere from seven to 17,000 live between San Francisco and Monterey. So our agencies have had to be more responsive and imaginative than others when it comes around to serving them.

According to Shippen, most of their attention had been focused on getting the men psychologically fit for a life outside of war and the military. Post-stress syndrome and variety of other mind-body ailments took a heavy toll among returnees in the past decade, but now the treatment priority has been shifted to a more pressing and practical concern: jobs.

"The veterans in this county represent a huge labor pool that any number of employers can benefit from," said Shippen. "And there are guys out there at the moment who want work now — today — and are willing to do almost anything just to get by. That's why I organized Rent-A-Vet Exchange (RAVE) — just to provide immediate work for men until they can get a hold of something more permanent."

Shippen is the volunteer director of this ancillary project and describes RAVE as a sort of Kelly Girl service which can furnish skilled personnel on short notice, short term basis. The office takes calls 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

"We have people with experience in almost every line of work imaginable," he said. "Masons, gardeners, clerks, drivers — you name it. The advantage of hiring our guys is pretty obvious too. For them, it's a survival job, so they take it very seriously. We want to do it well. If an assignment requires more than a couple of people, we send along a crew supervisor to make sure it's done right. It's pretty much the same way we did it in the army. The work is divided into 'avenues of responsibility.' That way there's no confusion about our duties.

By virtue of his eight-year stint in the army, and a one-year tour as combat medic in Vietnam, Shipman feels that he can fairly champion the men who come to him for a handhold on the scarce job market here. But he admits to some special difficulty too.

"Vietnam Vets are a situational minority."

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he said, "who because of our shared experiences find it a little tougher to settle down. War is dangerous and exciting and oddly enough, many of us find it hard to keep a job that will furnish the same level of intensity. That's why our individual employment histories have been spotty. But I see a change in that trend. We're getting older now and most of us want to settle down."

For those vets willing to make the greater commitment toward career work, but who lack the necessary training, an older more established agency is there to provide direction. Project VOTE, the populist-sounding acronym for Veterans Outreach Training and Employment, is part of the county's Veteran Service office. The seven-year-old program is headed by David Heaston, an "in-country" vet (one who saw combat action) and his partner Michelle Kremer, a former counselor for ex-offenders, who joined this program five years ago.

"We are primarily a referral service that tries to locate on-the-job training for vets in the private sector," said Kremer. "Since we are funded in part by the federal government, we're in the enviable position of actually reimbursing employers for 50 per cent of the man's salary."

Kremer explains that owing to the local economy here, most jobs they find are with small business rather than industry. But almost any offer would probably find a taker from among her applicants.

"We've placed men in occupations as varied as paralegals to glaziers," she said. "The most important thing for us though, is find a job which will match the man's long-range goals and interests. We've discovered that many vets found their first jobs outside of the service to be either too boring or too stressful to keep. That's why it's important for them to find something they'll really care about and get them headed in that direction."

With the passing of time — the war's been over for 10 years and is talked about more openly now — the social stigma of being part of that national trauma is reduced, said Kremer. No longer boys, most vets are in their 30s and want to have positions worthy of this maturity.

"In VOTE's seventh year, we can claim a steady success rate that has not only benefitted the vets, but also the community," she said. "These are men who have demonstrated their willingness to learn and to sacrifice, so the businessmen will know that they'll get a higher level of commitment from our guys than he'll get from someone hired off the street. Besides, we pay for half the training ourselves — an obvious bargain."

She said that once the vets land responsible and secure positions, most of them leave past work failures behind and "shake that monkey

off their backs for good."

"Naturally, I'm not a veteran myself," said Kremer, a petite and comely blonde. "But once you get to know these people, they become the most important friends on earth. There is a special quality about them, a real sense of brotherhood that is contagious."

Around the corner and down the hall from VOTE headquarters, is the state-run Employment Development Department staffed by retired first sergeant Joe Splane. Here, veterans seeking full-time job entry are referred to prospective employers with a minimum of bureaucratic interference. Splane, a black man who joined the army in 1948 when regiments were still segregated, knows from experience that ex-soldiers have a universal distrust for long lines and superfluous red tape.

"When someone comes to us for a job, I try to give them the minimum amount of paperwork," he said. "It's just part of making it easier for unemployed vets to get back out in the work force right away. You've got to remember, these guys had to deal with organizations all through the service, so they really have little faith in them. They don't believe that they'll get any help. So we have to go with a whole new approach. Our program is operating so well that I've been trying to get groups down where I live in Marina to try what we do here."

Thanks to a specially designed state benefit program, employers can reclaim 50 per cent of the worker's first year salary through TJTC — targeted Jobs Tax Credit, said SPLane. But he still feels that not enough details have been given to the business community about this attractive proposal.

"Once we get the word out, I feel the advantages of hiring our men will be clear," he said.

Splane, a 24-year army veteran, who saw action as a combat infantryman in both Korea and Vietnam, is also head of the Disabled American Vets in Santa Cruz. As if these two duties aren't enough, he fills in as veteran ex-offender counselor when time permits.

"I was practically born and raised in the army," he said. "I joined right out of high school and didn't leave until 1972. When I finally got out, I became the golf pro at the Fort Ord course. But after a few years of that, I was bored and wanted to have a job where I could really help people. I've got plenty of do here now."

Along with RAVE and VOTE, Splane contends that his office can assist in the final assimilation of another one of America's forgotten minorities — Veterans of Vietnam.

"By hiring us, you get more than the bare minimum. These guys are trying to prove something to themselves too."



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

Joe Splane of the state-run employment agency for Vietnam vets.