

## HOUSING

# Let's tell our vets, 'Welcome Home'

By **Craig Kirkpatrick**

"Welcome home."

To American veterans returning from a military assignment — whether overseas or stateside — those are the sweetest words they can ever hope to hear.

Yet, for thousands of homeless veterans living on the streets or in cars in Orange County and across the nation, welcome home is a concept they simply can't imagine experiencing. Warm, safe, and clean places to call home are despairingly out of their reach.

As Veterans Day approaches, it is time to finally take strong action locally on behalf of Orange County's homeless veterans. The time has come to reach out to them and say, at last, "Welcome Home."

The resources to do so are in place; as a community, we now need to join hands to put them to good use on behalf of our homeless veterans.

This past March, Orange County United Way launched a unique and ambitious program called WelcomeHomeOC. It's a joint effort amongst United Way, private philanthropists, and — here's the key — rental property owners like myself. The Apartment Association of Orange County, of which I am a board member, former president and interim executive director, is playing an instrumental role in this exciting new program, which is part of United Way's

larger umbrella initiative, United to End Homelessness.

WelcomeHomeOC works closely with rental property owners and managers to identify units that could become part of the program's housing inventory. The Housing Authority provides pre-qualified individuals and families with rental vouchers. The tenant who is housed then pays 30% of their income towards rent. The program helps with additional costs, such as holding fees and security deposits, as well as items like furnishings for the clients.

Importantly, the program stays in close contact with the residents, making sure they are receiving ongoing community services and overall case management. For Orange County rental property owners, the program is a win-win in every sense of the phrase. Owners will be welcoming vets who want, more than anything, a secure place they can call home. Vets who are fortunate enough to secure stable housing know a great thing when they see it. As a result, they are proud of their homes and treat them with respect.

But in my view, the most important reason for participating is because you'll be playing a critical role in helping solve our county's biggest crisis, homelessness — a festering problem that is only going to get worse unless we take the kind of bold action the WelcomeHomeOC program proposes.

Our nation was built on the

sacrifices of men and women who served, and who currently serve, in our Armed Forces. Through this innovative and compassionate program, we have a rare opportunity to do the right thing by local veterans who are working hard to regain self-sufficiency.

WelcomeHomeOC was designed to provide just that — but greater numbers of property owners are needed to realize the program's positive long-term potential and benefits.

When I was in junior high school, I participated in a poster contest to honor and help veterans. The theme of my poster was, "Help Them Help Themselves." Maybe that's why I am so impressed and excited by the WelcomeHomeOC program: It is founded on the belief that our vets deserve our support — and once they have it, will be able to use it to regain their dignity.

For that reason, I invite Orange County's rental property owners to join me in the program, so that on Veterans Day, our local vets hear the words that have the power to transform their lives.

"Welcome home."

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