

Village Houses Veterans in Arkansas

VFW members in Arkansas have restored community pride in their Post

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When construction began in early 2021 on a housing complex for veterans in Jonesboro, Arkansas, members of VFW Post 1991 wanted to offer help for the veterans and their families when they moved into the facilities.

In addition to assisting veterans, it was a way, Post Commander Robert Murphy said, to aid in improving the VFW's image as an organization that provides many services.

"It's not just a bar where veterans share old stories," said Murphy, a 23-year Army veteran who served from 1975 to 1998. "The canteen plays a role for our members, but there's so much more that we do."

Since taking over as the commander three years ago, Murphy has overseen the distribution of bi-monthly food boxes to veterans' families, donations of toys for Christmas and help with utility bills. Murphy also has worked to distribute supplies to the homeless and developed a program to provide service dogs to veterans.

"We know veterans are struggling," he said.

Post 1991 members soon focused on the Jonesboro Veterans Village project.

90 DAYS OF FREE RENT

Armed with a \$100,000 Federal Cares Act grant, the Post's 413 members first offered to buy furnishings and appliances for the nine houses built on an acre of land near downtown Jonesboro. But another civic organization decided to do that, purchasing couches, tables, chairs, washers, dryers and other electrical appliances.

"We didn't want to duplicate efforts," said Murphy, who retired as a Chief Warrant Officer 3. "We knew of veterans who were struggling. They were trying to get back on their feet. We thought, 'What is a good way to help them?'"

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The Post's members opted to buy a year's worth of cleaning supplies for each of the nine homes. That would free up veterans' money for food and utility bills, Murphy said.

Workers finished building the homes near the corner of Aggie Road and Allis Street just east of the downtown area in late summer of 2021.

Much of the funding came from the National Housing Trust Fund Program. Private donations also were received, and Arkansas Attorney General Leslie Rutledge donated \$250,000 to complete the Jonesboro Veterans Village.

There are seven 550-squarefoot, one-bedroom homes and two 950-square foot, two-bedroom homes on the complex. They were placed in a horseshoe shape on the lot with sidewalks and a pavilion in the center. At the southern edge of the lot is a community center. The entire project is surrounded by black fencing.

Veterans selected to live there are given 90 days of free rent and assistance in finding jobs. It is the only housing project of its kind in Arkansas and one of only a few in the midsouth.

Already, officials in Little Rock and Fayetteville have shown interest in replicating the Jonesboro model and building similar complexes in their Arkansas cities.

"Housing is a key for some veterans," said Lynda Nash, the director of the Beck Pride Center at Arkansas State University, a program aimed at helping northeast Arkansas veterans.

Nash also worked on securing funding for the housing project.

"Some [veterans] live in cars," she said. "Others are homeless. We wanted to give them something nice."

'THE HARDEST PART WAS ASKING FOR HELP'

There were delays in getting veterans into the homes, Murphy said. The Department of Housing seemed to often change its housing regulations, and the process to apply for a home was slow.

Then, on Sept. 13, 2021, someone broke into several of the homes and stole clothes, washers and dryers, furnishings and other items. Insurance covered the losses, but it further delayed the opening.

Finally, in late December, the first three veterans moved into houses.

"This is amazing," Mark Freeman, a Marine who served in Japan from 1998 to 2003, said of the homes.

Freeman lived in Bono, Arkansas, a small, neighboring community of Jonesboro, until he

got into a dispute with his landlord. The apartment owner locked him out of his place, and Freeman ended up living in his car.

“The hardest part was asking for help,” Freeman said.

Jeremy Wells, a Navy veteran who served from 1999 to 2010, moved into the village on Dec. 21. Someone had broken into his home in Walnut Ridge, Arkansas, twice in early December, stealing everything, “including the trash,” he said. Wells was then homeless and without a car — the thief made off with his vehicle as well. He went to the emergency room at a Walnut Ridge hospital shortly after, complaining of stomach pains.

He was later released and began walking in the frigid December night toward Jonesboro, some 25 miles away.

“I was freezing my butt off,” Wells said. “But I had nowhere to go.”

He called an acquaintance who picked him up, and then he called VFW Post 1991 in Jonesboro. Within a day, Post members helped place Wells into a home at the village. He set a small Christmas tree atop his stereo for the holiday season.

‘THE VFW HAS HELPED GREATLY’

Jeffery Hill Sr., of Texarkana, Arkansas, was the first to move into the village. Hill is a U.S. Army veteran, serving from 1978 to 1983 with the 82nd Airborne Division.

He had lived in a hotel in southwestern Arkansas, paying \$2,000 a month.

He had relatives in Jonesboro and visited them briefly before being treated at the John J. Pershing VA Medical Center in Poplar Bluff, Missouri, for a knee injury. Two days after his release from the center, he was admitted into the Jonesboro housing village.

“It’s a blessing,” he said. “I got stuck in motels. I was depressed and I couldn’t find my way out.”

There are nearly 6,000 veterans living in Craighead County, which includes Jonesboro, said Larry Pierce, a VA service officer for the county.

Pierce, a Life member of VFW Post 2242 in Paragould, Arkansas, served with the 2nd Marine Brigade in Korea in 1968 and 1969. He later served with a Marine liaison brigade in Cambodia in the 1970s. A former sergeant, Pierce said he suffers from post traumatic stress disorder now.

“I’ve got what they’ve got,” he said of the veterans he helps with applying for disability,

resumes, job applications and other services. He estimates there are between 75 and 100 homeless veterans in Jonesboro.

“There is a strong need in this county,”

Pierce said. “The VFW has helped greatly.”

The projects, including the Veterans Village, have helped restore the image of VFW Post 1991. Several years ago, a civic organization with a club across Airport Road from the Post was the scene of a small riot. Police were called and the club eventually was closed, and the organization suspended.

Although the fracas did not involve VFW members, the Post was included in talks about the incident because of its proximity to the club.

“We had the reputation then of just being a bar,” said Post 1991 member Ira Brown, a 22-year veteran of the Navy who was a chief petty aviation and electrician officer during two tours in Vietnam. “We’re not that way at all.”

The 83-year-old Brown says the inclusion of new veterans from the Gulf War has helped keep the Post young.

“We relied on Korean and Vietnam veterans for so long,” he said. “We were getting old. The new ones came in and we started seeing changes.”

REGAINING A SENSE OF PURPOSE

Mark Davis, commander of VFW’s Department of Arkansas and Life member of Post 1991, said a lot of the Post’s work goes unnoticed. Each year, the members give a \$30,000 college scholarship to a high school essay writer.

They also hold a motorcycle ride to collect Christmas toys for veterans’ families. Finally, in late December, the first and give away turkeys for the holidays. The Post’s Auxiliary bakes and sells goods each Christmas as a fundraiser.

“Our motto is, ‘We’re the last to let you down,’” said Davis, who served in the Navy for 14 years as a chief petty officer and then with the Army for 12 years as a master sergeant.

“I don’t want to see a veteran in need,” he said. “I’m going to do everything I can to get you back on your feet.”

Some veterans have a hard time adjusting to civilian life, leading to problems, Murphy said.

“There’s such a sense of purpose in uniform,” he said. “You make life and death decisions when you’re 18 or 19. You come back here and there’s nothing. You lose that sense of

purpose."

More are expected to move into the village. Eventually, officials want to see the nine homes filled with veterans continuously.

After a warm welcome home from the Gulf War, veterans are now forgotten and must fend for themselves, Murphy said.

"The veterans of today are now experiencing what the Vietnam veterans did when they first came home," he said.

"When I came home from the Navy, no one was waiting at the pier for me," Wells added. "Here [at the village], I've made friends."

This article is featured in the April 2022 issue of [VFW magazine](#), and was written by Kenneth Heard. Heard is a former newspaper and television reporter based in Jonesboro, Arkansas. He currently is the media information director for the Craighead County (Arkansas) Prosecuting Attorney's office.