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Veterans Matter continues to alleviate plight of homeless veterans

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Homelessness in United States has reached epidemic proportions: 57,849 veterans are homeless on any given night, according to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD).

Ken Leslie, founder of homeless awareness initiative Tent City and and nonprofit 1Matters, said he started Veterans Matter in 2012 with the hope that he could change such statistics.

“Our goal is simply to house as many veterans as we can, as fast as we can,” Leslie said.

Leslie founded the organization when Shawn Dowling, a social worker with Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Ann Arbor Health System, told him that \$600 stood between a few local veterans and a home for the night.

“The next day I called Barbara Petee with ProMedica Health System and said I need \$26,000 for this program and, by the way, I need it at black ops speed,” Leslie said. “Foundations, if you know anything about them, turtles can kick their ass at speed. But, seven days later, Valentine’s Day at 5 p.m. she calls and says ‘Hey, you have your full funding.’ Eleven days from idea to execution.”

Petee said collaborating with the organization seemed like a good fit, given the goals of ProMedica.

“Because addressing the social determinants of health, which includes safe and adequate housing, is a priority for ProMedica, this was a logical organization and program for us to support,” Petee said.

Petee said that because a home is considered a basic health need, choosing to fund Veterans Matter was not difficult.

“When we can help ensure the dignity and self-worth of individuals by helping to address basic needs, we encourage better paths for solid health care in which individuals take an active role in that care,” Petee said.

The organization boasts more than 300 success stories, and the number continues to grow each day.

Marine Corps veteran Cpl. Robert Pulliam is one of those stories. In a letter to Leslie, Pulliam said he wants to pass on the charitable spirit instilled in him by the VA and Veterans Matter.

“If there is anything I can do for you or Vet Matters, please feel free to ask,” Pulliam said in the letter, which Leslie keeps in his office. “I’d like to give something back to a good thing.”

“Several of [the charity’s beneficiaries] have been engaged with us but this guy, I mean wow, that’s the heart,” Leslie said. “You find that, once you help a lot of these people, their first reaction is to want to



Ken Leslie, founder of 1Matters and Veterans Matter

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give back.”

Another letter is framed in Ken’s office. This one does not include the name of the veteran, but it does include a powerful image.

“I just realized that I have a key to my own place, I know where I am going to be sleeping tonight,” the veteran said. “It is like the stress of the last several years has been lifted off my shoulders at once.”

Leslie said housing more veterans at expedited speeds is the only real goal he has set.

“Even one more night in a shelter is way too many for us,” Leslie said.

Thanks to the success of Veterans Matter, Leslie was able to travel to Washington, D.C., in June for the Summit on Veteran Homelessness. First lady Michelle Obama called Leslie in to the conference.

“That’s not even on my radar,” Leslie said. “I would never have thought about getting a personal invite from the first lady to go to the White House. Why would I?”

Leslie said he found out the invitation came because of the efficiency and scalability of his organization.

Petee said she believes Leslie is the perfect face for the organization.

“Ken’s leadership has been remarkable and clearly his personal passion and commitment to this issue is what has ensured continued success,” Petee said.

Celebrities such as John Mellencamp and Stevie Nicks have endorsed Veteran’s Matter through sponsorship, fundraising concerts and public service announcements.

“It’s because it’s so real and they feel it,” Leslie said. “Mellencamp got involved in 2007 because he came down to our Tent City and he was really moved by how the community came together. 1Matters was started because John invited everybody from Tent City to the show and one of them came up afterward and said, ‘John talked to us from the stage, I guess I really do matter.’”

Leslie said he is both overwhelmed and underwhelmed by the success his charity has seen in this inaugural year.

“We want to house a thousand more veterans that are out there right now, so we just have to raise that money,” Leslie said.

The two people Leslie said he wants to thank the most are Petee and Lee Armstrong of the Veterans Services Commission. Leslie said he attributes the housing of 65 Northwest Ohio veterans to Petee and Armstrong because of their optimistic attitudes and sizeable donations.

Leslie said he also extends his gratitude to the VA and HUD, because they bring the needy veterans to Veterans Matters and give them the houses. All they need then is the deposit.

“All the heavy work is done by the VA people,” Leslie said. “By the time they bring them to us, they’re at the door and they have keys jingling in their hand, they just need somebody to say ‘Yes, you can go in.’ So we provide that ‘Yes.’”

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