

Cape group gives veterans help, hope

MICHAEL MILLER, Staff Writer | Posted: Monday, April 4, 2016 6:30 am



VETERANS GROUP

Mark Milberger, Vietnam veteran, was helped by a new group that formed three years ago, Citizens-Veterans Advisory Committee, to help veterans in crisis. Milberger got help finding the apartment he lives in now, after living in his car for quite some time. March 31, 2016. (The Press of Atlantic City/ Viviana Pernot)

Vietnam War veteran Mark Milberger moved from Louisiana to Middle Township last year only to find himself living in his car.

Milberger, 59, was jobless and broke this winter after spending a career operating cranes on drilling rigs in the Gulf of Mexico. He is retired and lives on Social Security disability payments.

“It was kind of touch and go. Living in your car in the cold, you blanket up,” he said. “You do the best you can.”

He found help from a new Cape May County charity that is dedicated to supporting veterans in crisis.

Through Catholic Charities and the state Department of Labor, he was referred to the Citizens-Veterans Advisory Council, a charity that organized three years ago.

The nonprofit found an efficiency apartment for him in Lower Township and gave him a head-start on the rent.

“They got me off the streets. Found me an apartment. I’m just blessed with what I got now,” he said.

Veterans call the charity simply “the coalition,” which is fitting. Board members are executives and administrators from Cape Regional Medical Center, Volunteers in Medicine, the Southern Shore Chapter of the American Red Cross and veterans’ organizations.

They’re problem-solvers who have deep phone contacts, said Jackie Blades, who works at the One-Stop Center for the state Department of Labor.

“I am very impressed by the volunteers,” she said.

Blades coordinates with the other board members to find solutions to each veteran’s particular challenge. Sometimes it’s as simple as replacing an old appliance.

“Emergency housing is a big issue for veterans. It can take a month to get emergency housing. We fill that gap,” she said.

U.S. Marine Anthony Marino, of Wildwood, found himself behind on utility payments when he had an unexpected veterinary bill.

“If it wasn’t for Jackie Blades, I wouldn’t have been able to pay my rent,” Marino said. “They’re helping a lot of veterans in Cape May County. Every county should have a coalition like this.”

The group uses its own community and business contacts as well as social networking to move quickly. Blades said they bought steel-toed workboots for a mechanic who needed them for a new job. And they helped another veteran get relicensed as a commercial truck driver.

“We’ve provided help with electric and gas payments, getting shoes or clothing,” she said.

Veterans referred to the council are vetted to make sure resources are going to the group’s mission.

At its monthly board meeting in March, the charity’s Chairman and founder Johnnie Walker, of Lower Township, announced the group received its 501c3 tax-deductible status from the IRS, which will allow them to pursue federal grants and raise money. The council does not have any paid staff or administration.

Milberger said the charity sent him furniture for his empty apartment. Now he’s in a position to help other veterans in trouble, he said.

“I’ve never seen an organization go out of its way like this. In Louisiana, you have nothing like this,” he said.

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http://www.pressofatlanticcity.com/news/cape-group-gives-veterans-help-hope/article_1adf357a-f916-11e5-8a50-7fe92224396f.html?mode=print