

Homeless vet finds help to start new life

'Never give up,' says local man who was unemployed for 2 years.

By Mary McCarty
Staff Writer

After losing his job, sleeping on a friend's couch for 18 months and spending a night at a homeless shelter in Hamilton, Navy veteran Daniel Sandlin seemed destined for what is becoming an all too familiar reality: another of our nation's veterans living on the street.

But Sandlin's story has a different ending and it is one he wants to share with some of the estimated 150,000 homeless American veterans.

"Never give up," the 58-yearold Sandlin said after landing a job and a chance at a new life. "Take advantage of the opportunities afforded to you and do what you need to get back on your feet."

Steady employment doesn't always follow for those who serve their country.

How to get help

Out-of-work veterans can call AMVETS Career Center Veterans Employment Specialist, Kelley Koons, at (937) 253-7042, ext.1454, or visit www.amvetscareercenter.org

Veterans who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless can apply for the Volunteers of America's Homeless Veterans Reintegration Program by calling (937) 253-7042, ext. 1451, or by coming to an assessment every Wednesday morning at 10 a.m. at the VOA offices in Building 400 on the grounds of the Dayton VA Center.

Ohio veterans already have a 12 percent unemployment rate, significantly higher than the state's 8.5 percent average. The prospect appears even bleaker for Ohio veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan, who were unemployed at a rate of 14.8 percent, according to the most recent figures available from the Ohio Department of Veterans Services. Sandlin faced long odds for finding employment after being out of work for nearly two years and being convicted of failing to pay child support. At the Hamilton homeless shelter, Sandlin noticed a Volunteers of America (VOA) brochure about services available to veterans.

In less than two months, he found shelter at Dayton's VOA campus and enrolled in the VOA's Veterans Reintegration Program. They referred him to Kelley Koons, an AmeriCorps member and a veterans employment specialist for the AMVETS Career Center.

With the help of the two agencies, Sandlin filled out more than 40 applications and landed a job that he loves. He's still living in the VOA's transitional housing program on the grounds of the Dayton VA Center as he works to pay his back child support and fees.

He is one of 109 local veterans who has been helped by the Homeless Veterans Reintegration Program, funded by a three year, \$300,000 grant from the Department of Labor,

since it started in September. "This is a very supportive environment," said program director Annabelle Matusoff. "This grant is so helpful for these men. A lot are middle-aged. Some have abused drugs and alcohol for years and they want to get back into the work force, save their money and become part of society again."

The program helps the veterans with job training and provides them with new shoes and work clothing. They conduct roleplaying exercises in preparation for job interviews. "If they're a felon, they need to be honest," Matusoff said. "We teach them to explain what they did. It's really important they learn to verbalize what happened and why they deserve this opportunity so they can become self-reliant."

Noted Sandlin: "If you work this program, it works."

It was a bitter pill, he acknowledges, not being able to support his children. "You can't pay child support because you can't find work, and they pile felonies on you to make it impossible for you to find work," he said.

Sandlin has been working for the past three months as a mold operator for Tom Smith Industries in Clayton, a plastic injection molding company that works with the automotive industry. The job seemed well-suited to the skills he acquired during 10 years of employment at the American

Fan Company in Cincinnati.

"When Daniel walked in my office, I knew he had something we needed on our team," recalled human resources administrator Tarra Enochs. "He has turned out to be an excellent, model employee."

Enochs said she hired Sandlin not only for his manufacturing background but for other, intangible qualities.

For his part, Sandlin declares, "I love my job." He tells other veterans not to become discouraged: "Be open and honest as you possibly can about your qualifications and what you can do for the company, because the military wins a great deal of professionalism and determination that can be translated into what you do."

Sandlin even won \$75 at the office Christmas party which he used to buy work boots and re-activate his cellphone. "I never win anything," he marveled. Recalled Enochs, "You should have seen his eyes. It was such a good feeling. It was like the ending of a sappy movie."

Sandlin spent Christmas visiting his three daughters and four grandchildren, and felt a newfound sense of dignity and worth as a gainfully employed father.

"I really enjoy the job and I really enjoy the work," he said. "They are like a family."