

Editorial Finally, VA is on the right path



A homeless veteran attends the VA's Homeless-to-Housed Veteran's Stand Down event on Nov. 4, 2015 at the Veteran's Center in West Los Angeles. (Los Angeles Times)

By **The Times Editorial Board**

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Nearly five years after a group of homeless veterans sued the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs for allegedly misusing its sprawling property in West L.A., the department has finally approved a draft master plan that will focus the campus more sharply on the people it was intended to serve. The plan still has to undergo environmental and historic preservation reviews before it can become final. Nevertheless, its clear aim is to turn the campus from a place mainly used for dispensing medical care into an inviting locale designed not just for vets' medical care, but also for their social, recreational, counseling and housing needs.

Arguably its most significant feature is a plan to build 1,200 units of permanent supportive housing. An additional 900 could be added if necessary. This housing is geared for the most vulnerable homeless veterans — those with severe disabilities or health problems, the elderly and women veterans, including ones with children.

The last official count of homeless individuals in the county found more than 4,000 veterans, giving the county the largest concentration of homeless vets in the nation. The VA and many of the veterans (although not all) who weighed in on the master plan's development said they weren't seeking to house all of those vets on the campus, even if, at 388 acres, it has the room for them. They argued, persuasively, that not all homeless veterans would choose to live there — and that they should be able to choose where to live, aided by federal rental subsidies.

One of the other major changes called for in the plan would be the addition of a “town center” for veterans, populated with cafes, a fitness center and an outdoor gathering area. This area would be designed to serve all vets, whether they lived on campus or off.

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Homelessness has become a crisis throughout Los Angeles county, and it's been made particularly difficult to solve by the paucity of both affordable dwellings and supportive housing units, which provide the services many homeless people need to become self-sufficient. The VA's agreement to create, through new construction and the restoration of unused buildings on its campus, well over 1,000 units would be a remarkable contribution toward alleviating this scourge. And it's woefully overdue from an agency that ignored homeless veterans' rightful complaints for years. It took a new VA Secretary, Robert McDonald, to bring about a settlement to the vets' lawsuit. The fact that a new master plan is in place just one year later is a credit to the efforts made by McDonald and his team, as well as by the veterans involved.

Of course, there is heavier lifting ahead. The VA wants the first 490 housing units to be ready within 30 months of Congress giving the go-ahead. That clock hasn't even started ticking, however. First, Congress has to lift the ban it placed on the West L.A. VA entering into lease agreements, so it can sign deals with developers to build housing. Sen. Dianne Feinstein (D-CA) and Rep. Ted Lieu (D-Torrance) each have introduced proposals to lift the ban, which Feinstein had helped bring about, and Lieu's bill may move through a House committee next month. These measures' bi-partisan support should make this a no-brainer. There is already an interested developer, but the firm can't obtain financing until the VA can offer a lease.

Meanwhile, UCLA and the Brentwood School — two institutions whose facilities on the VA campus were deemed by a federal court to be improper uses — have been negotiating with the VA for months over ways to offer services in exchange for being allowed to stay there. UCLA reached an agreement with the VA Thursday morning in which it would continue to use the Jackie Robinson Stadium for baseball games, but at five times the discounted rent it had been paying. More significantly, the university will create and run for veterans a family “well-being center” and a legal clinic on the VA grounds. The Brentwood School continues to negotiate, but its officials say they are committed to allowing veterans to use the swimming pool, fields and tennis courts the school built on VA property. That's all encouraging, provided the commitments are fulfilled.

It's regrettable that it took a lawsuit over the use of the VA's grounds by lessees that offered little or nothing to veterans to jumpstart all these agreements. But this effort has always been about making the West L.A. campus focus on housing and serving veterans. The VA, finally, seems to be on a path toward making that happen.

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