

David Przepioski
Lived Experience Testimony
Vermont State House
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Hello everyone, my name is David Przepioski. I have been asked to speak today about homelessness from a veteran's lived experience. Of course, every veterans path in life is different but there are many similarities as well. Here is my story:

In 1977, at the age of 18, while still in high school, I joined the Marine Corp. I served for 6 years till 1983. It was one of the few times in our country's history that we had been at peace. Some Veterans have not been as lucky as me. As a consequence, they have had to bear the brunt of war.

I was a good soldier; a good Marine and I received an honorable discharge at a rank of E-4. I was recommended for a promotion to E-5, then encouraged to re-enlist, for more training, a cash bonus and a promotion to E-6, but I turned down the honor as I was ready to return to the civilian life. For the next 8-10 years or so I tried the best I could to put my military experience behind me. I rode my bicycle for many, many miles per day, traveled a lot and simply enjoyed my youth, and just being alive.

Eventually I tried to settle down and become a so-called responsible, tax paying, credit card carrying, citizen. Then it all caught up to me. I spent the better part of the 90's contending with the veterans homeless experience. After once again clawing my way back to being housed after my third time of being homeless I told myself that if I ever became homeless again, I would commit suicide.

For the next 8 years or so I worked with the roughest group of construction workers ever, finishing concrete and taking some art classes at a community college at night. After two successive, failed long-term relationships, I decided to move to Vermont for a better life. That was almost 19 years ago. The problem was, my life became worse. Low wages and high rents contributed to an endless struggle to keep a roof over my head and food in my stomach. I was unemployed during the recession, till I found one dead end job after another.

I had enough of the American mythological capitalist dream as the cost of arising from poverty was like selling my soul. Leaving behind only the shell of a human being.

I decided to return to college despite my fear of student debt. Nor did I have any illusions of landing a high paying job after graduation. I just simply love the

idea of education and returning these gifts back to our community to create a healthy society.

Some students get new cars from their parents as a graduation gift. Or head out to Europe for a year long backpacking adventure. I became homeless for the fourth time.

Being homeless is like going feral. Not literally like a wild cat but being almost completely removed from society. My 4th time of being homeless was different because I sought out help from the VA. This gave me hope. I ended up becoming a resident at Canal Street Veterans Homeless Shelter in Winooski just in time to start a graduate program at Vermont College of Fine Arts. On the front door to my room, I taped a Bread and Puppet poster that simply said Thanks! On the inside of my door when I walked out of my room it said Courage! More difficult than being homeless is the transition to becoming housed. It's like being a wild animal trapped in a cage. The most difficult hurdle for a homeless vet to overcome is to trust the same system that partly contributed to them becoming homeless in the first place. This is where case management comes in. It is critically important; I can't possibly stress this point enough. Problem was, for most of the time I had lived at Canal Street there was virtually no case management to speak of. I went through about 7-8 case managers, some were COTS employees who quit or were fired, none of them were vets or understood vet issues, most of them were incompetent, if there was anyone around at all. We were on our own at Canal Street, sometimes it was like the wild west. After only about a month at Canal Street I no longer had hope. I lived in fear that I would become homeless again.

After about a year and a half I got some much-needed help by a VA Lakeside Clinic, Homeless Counselor. Even so I thought it was too late for me and that I'd become homeless again. In response I sent out an e-mail to create awareness by the powers that be, and it got some traction. I just hoped that I would leave Canal Street a better place than I found it. Six months later a case manager, the first ever vet started his job at Canal Street! As I slowly made progress towards Supplemental Security Income, VA Disability and a Housing and Urban Development Veterans Assistance for Stable Housing, known as HUD VASH, I was given an extension past the two-year time limit. On July 1st, 2019 I moved out into my own apartment in Montpelier and I strongly believed that I had left Canal Street better than I found it. The HUD VASH is a one-year program with VA Case Management in co-operation with The Vermont State Housing Authority that leads to a section 8 voucher. I am great full for this program or else I would be homeless again. Or worse.

Six weeks or so after I had left Canal Street, I began to hear bits and pieces of information, from a bunch of different people that Canal Street was being shut down. No new vets have been admitted into the program since maybe 2018, presently all applicants are being denied, all apartment furniture from all 4 floors has been removed, civilians are moving into what used to be homeless vet housing, the case manager's hours have been cut back to 15, there is only one vet left who has been in the program for a while and will probably leave soon.

I am upset and greatly saddened that my homeless brothers and sisters will not get the help that I got.

I had many conversations with many people, asking the same question; "Why was Canal Street being shut down"? Sadly no one had the courage to tell me why. Even sadder no one was willing to stick their neck out to oppose the closing. I did all the research, I possibly could to find the answer. For instance, there are about 40,000 homeless vets still left in the country. These numbers have slowly been reduced because of the HUD VASH Program. At the same time Trump in all his dazzling brilliance proposes drastic cuts to this program. We have been at war for almost 18 years and most recently on the brink of yet another. These returning vets need our support. I found an article dated December 5th, 2019 about a press conference, geared towards prevention of vet suicides amongst Governor Phil Scott, Vt. National Guard, General Gregory Knight director of WRJ VA hospital Dr. Brett Rusch, Meghan Snitkin WRJ Suicide Prevention Coordinator and many others. They signed a letter promising unified community support. There are over 6,000 veteran suicides per year. There were 60,000 vet suicides between 2008 and 2017. Vt Digger reported July 6th, 2019 that VT veteran suicide rates are amongst the highest in the nation. There is also a strong correlation between veteran suicide and veteran homelessness.

So with all of that being said I have come to the conclusion that the question is not; "Why is Canal Street closing?" The question is; "Why is Canal Street not remaining open?"

Thank you for listening.

