



Mission Statement

To help U.S. veterans who are displaced, disabled or otherwise in transition become integrated into community life by giving them a welcoming work/training environment and trainers/co-workers to act as mentors and role models, and by connecting them with VA and community programs to further ease this transition into mainstream community life through the Stand Down for Homeless Veterans.

Organization Purpose

Founded in 1999, National Association of Systems Administrators Education Corporation (NASA Education) of Crystal Lake, Illinois, gives hope and promise to our military veterans. NASA Education's primary program, Project Fresh Start, focuses on veterans who are homeless, displaced, disabled or are otherwise in transition to reintegrate them into the workforce with competitive wage jobs. An increase in skill level and income results in greater self-determination, high self-esteem and a healthier lifestyle. Along with reintegration into the workforce, we focus heavily on residential stability so that the veterans can finally get off of the streets and are able to achieve stable, affordable housing.

Project Fresh Start has two major geographic areas – McHenry County, Illinois, a once-affluent Chicago suburb that has seen a 58.8 percent increase in severe poverty since 2000 and now has a large homeless population, and FEMA-1604-DR-Mississippi, an area that is still feeling the devastation of Hurricane Katrina two years later. In addition to serving homeless individuals in Illinois and Mississippi, we have provided training and supportive services to individuals in Wisconsin, Florida, Michigan, Washington and Indiana.

While the veteran is a participant in Project Fresh Start, we provide transitional housing, transportation, training, counseling, employment services and any other service necessary for successful reintegration. Daily we ensure they attend any required appointments with the VA Medical Center, legal and probation court system, interviews, etc.

The participant's weekly activities could consist of participation in events such as life skills training, classroom training, workforce integration evaluation, the review of daily and weekly timelines and successes, appointments with the Veteran Service Officer on staff with NASA Education, intra- and interpersonal counseling, NASA Education's substance abuse individual and group meetings or community substance abuse meetings (AA, NA, Al-Anon).

We accept donations of vehicles that we repair, provide with license plates and bring to legal standards for the use of graduate participants so they will have transportation to their new jobs. This often involves working collaboratively with court and legal entities to help the individual clear away misdemeanor offenses such as past speeding tickets or vagrancy charges that are impediments to the participants' receiving a driver's license.

We have received support through grants from the Illinois Department of Veterans' Affairs and the McHenry County Community Foundation to pay for a van to transport participants to appointments at the VA facilities, court dates, substance abuse therapy group and individual sessions; a trailer to transport donated vehicles that aren't drivable to our service center for repair; legal fees in transferring titles, buying license plates and drivers' license fees for the participants; parts for repairing the vehicles; and miscellaneous expenses such as gasoline money and tires. We are also very grateful to individuals who have donated cash and cars to us for this purpose. Members of the Marine Corps. League of McHenry County have donated bicycles for the veterans to use in good weather for recreation and on short errands while their drivers' license issues are being addressed.

As part of the community re-integration process, we require the participant to provide five hours of volunteering for various organizations and purposes within the community. This gives the once-homeless veteran the opportunity to be perceived as a provider of generosity rather than a recipient. For some, it is a revelation that they have something to give others. Many of the participants have been completely self-focused – and understandably so – in a grim day-to-day struggle to find food and a place to lay their heads at night. This survival mode is a positive while they are homeless, but it gets in their way when it comes to reintegrating into the community and workforce. This mindset doesn't produce team players. This mindset also stands in the way of making satisfying personal relationships and leading to the formation of loving families and friendships.

After all, that's really what we want for each of our veterans – a happy family, fulfilling work, congenial friendships, a safe and comfortable home and a good life. That's what they were defending for all of us when they served in the U.S. military – the privilege of raising our families and living in safe communities. They certainly deserve more than a hand-to-mouth existence on the streets, to be bounced from one transitional home to another or to live in genteel poverty on minimum wage supplemented with a small disability income in a cramped, possibly unsafe apartment. Another aspect of our program is helping the veteran explore all VA and community programs available to put together the financing to buy condos or houses.

Although we are a community-based rather than a faith-based nonprofit organization, we offer a faith-based, nondenominational Bible Study to participants who live in our transitional housing. This is led by a compassionate and well-qualified individual who was once homeless himself. This individual also is a certified AA leader and has proven to be an exemplary role model and mentor for our participants.

For all of these reasons we believe we offer an extremely comprehensive program for the veterans. They come to us with a multitude of complexities and we have found that we need to address all of these complexities at the same time if the participants are to be reintegrated into the community in any significant way. It is an enormous undertaking, but it is also a great privilege to have the opportunity to do this fulfilling and important work under the leadership of our executive director, John Blanchard, who served for eight years with the U.S. Navy and has a deep commitment to help his less fortunate brothers and sisters in arms.

Some participants need to progress in small steps to achieve their goals of independence, particularly those who were chronically homeless. For these individuals, the life skills classes are particularly important if they are to reintegrate into a mainstream employment situation. Some of them have been so engaged in the daily struggle to find food and shelter that they have forgotten how to get along with others in the workforce and the general community. They don't know how to establish and maintain a home. They need to learn how to prepare nutritional meals and store food safely, how to manage a budget, how to operate and care for household appliances, and how to get along with others in the workplace or in the neighborhood. Some need to explore the rudiments of good hygiene. We also teach them how to use Microsoft Office, email and the Internet along with other basic computer skills.

Because chronically homeless veterans with complexities of issues may be with the program and in the transitional housing for the maximum of two years, they need to start experiencing some successes relatively soon so they won't become discouraged and give up. If they haven't been in the mainstream community for decades, as is the case with some older Vietnam era veterans, the idea of joining the mainstream workplace might be extremely intimidating. For that reason, NASA Education aggressively explores opportunities for "cottage industries," or employment at our service center in partnerships with area businesses. For example, John Blanchard, the executive director, meets with factory owners to get contracts to make objects like small plastic parts. These small, inexpensive parts are often outsourced to foreign countries because the local manufacturers can't afford to hire American workers to make them. So, why not give them an opportunity to give employment to American workers who are veterans and who will be supervised by NASA Education trainers to produce the same parts at a similar price to what they would pay a foreign company? This work is integrated into the individual's education plan as vocational and life skills training, and the participant is paid a nominal amount to produce the parts. The participant learns the experience of regularly punching a time clock, performing the work, getting along with co-workers, following the trainer's instructions and earning some money along the way in a simulation of a real work environment. Succeeding at this gives the participants self-esteem and a little money in their pockets.

Another aspect of Project Fresh Start is employment for veterans who aren't necessarily homeless but whose military skills have not translated into civilian ones. They haven't yet lost their connection with the life skills instilled in them by the military, so the turn-around time for these participants is much faster than for homeless participants in Project Fresh Start. Most of these participants are younger veterans, some from the current conflict in Iraq and Afghanistan. For example, NASA Education has a partnership with Olsun Electric Corporation, a local manufacturer of transformers, to train these young veterans in welding, fabrication, blueprint reading and winding to qualify for a job at the company. Upon completion of their specialized training, they fill out Olsun employment applications which go to Olsun with a cover letter from the head trainer who provides the details of their training. Upon employment, they not only make a competitive wage, but they also have the opportunity to embark upon a paid, two-year apprentice program that will result in a good salary. All along the way, they have support from their trainers at NASA Education. John Blanchard aggressively seeks out other companies that will provide similar opportunities for veterans.

NASA Education also helps veterans set up businesses of their own so they can bid on government contracts. Collectively, we call these the Avant-Garde Companies. Self-employment is often an appropriate alternative for veterans who have disabilities or other barriers to mainstream employment such as the need for flexible or home-based employment because of child care responsibilities or family members with chronic illnesses who require their presence in the home. Liberating Solutions, a company headed by a disabled veteran, recently received a \$270,000 contract from the Bureau of Public Debt in Parkersburg, West Virginia, to provide and load software on 150 laptop computers. It also has received a \$3,500 contract from Wisconsin's Fort McCoy to remove trees from five acres of property in Joliet, which Fort McCoy uses for an artillery range.

Outreach to the homeless veteran community is an enormously important part of our mission, so our other major program -- the semiannual two-day Stand Down for Homeless Veterans and the one-day mini-Stand Downs -- is integral to it. We often recruit homeless veterans as participants for Project Fresh Start directly from the Stand Down.

The two-day Stand Downs are held in March and October at YMCA Camp Algonquin, 1889 Cary Road, in Algonquin, Illinois. Homeless veteran participants receive meals and overnight shelter during the event; medical screenings through North Chicago VA Medical Center which also provides information and referrals for the domiciliary program and mental health services; employment services through veterans outreach representatives at VETS/DOL; housing assistance, food vouchers and bus tickets from the Veterans Assistance Commissions in McHenry and Kane Counties as well as referrals for food stamps; legal counseling from a local attorney and Prairie State Legal Services; referrals for dental appointments from local dentists; free haircuts provided by volunteer stylists; massages provided by volunteer therapists; donated clothes, coats, underwear and shoes, hygiene kits provided by Eli Lilly Co. and much more.

After the two-day Stand Downs, we host a series of small, one-day Stand Downs that consist of lunch, some referral services and the distribution of seasonal needs. After the October Stand Down, we have the mini-Stand Downs weekly at our service center in Crystal Lake culminating in a turkey dinner and all the trimmings provided by NASA Inc., our corporate sponsor, and NASA Education staff members the week before Thanksgiving. We distribute flyers in advance and pick the homeless veterans up at the Metra Stations. We give them a hot meal, coats and clothing donated by the community, underwear, toiletry kits, and we assess their needs to connect them with services. We also have one-day Stand Downs in summer after the emergency winter shelters close to distribute warm weather clothes, toiletry kits, insect repellent and sunscreen.

Another focus of the Stand Down is young veterans recently returned from service in Iraq and Afghanistan. Often these individuals are unemployed and have disabilities that are either physical or mental, such as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) or Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI), and are in need of services. They often do not have the means of supporting themselves, but they do not consider themselves homeless because they might be living temporarily with friends and family until they get on their feet. Even if they are reduced to living in their cars, they are too proud to admit they're homeless.

At the Stand Down we also help older veterans who have lived and worked in the mainstream community for a period of years and suddenly find themselves unemployed – and therefore without medical benefits -- or at risk of losing their housing. Sometimes they need medical attention or have physical conditions and illnesses that require expensive medication they cannot afford. These are often individuals who served their country unselfishly, reintegrated seamlessly into civilian life and never took advantage of any of the benefits to which they were entitled, but now they need help. Often they have never been registered in the VA system, and the Stand Down is a perfect opportunity for this.

Therefore, we market the Stand Down not as an event exclusively for homeless veterans but as a way for a veteran of any era in need of services to register for VA medical care, apply for VA disability benefits or DD214s, receive employment services, receive housing assistance if needed, or any community services they require. We always have plenty of food and donated clothing, and volunteer hairstylists certainly have no objection to giving a free haircut to a veteran in need regardless of whether he or she is actually homeless.

John Blanchard is in the process of purchasing and renovating two apartment buildings in McHenry County, Illinois, to expand NASA Education's present housing to accommodate 32 homeless veterans while they participate in Project Fresh Start. Simultaneously, John Blanchard is looking for a suitable apartment house in Mississippi to house homeless veterans and build a service center to provide vocational rehabilitation and community integration services there.