

At homeless camp, waiting and worrying

Commentary



J.D. Mullane

Chris Hilgar is 51 and homeless. It's Monday. He stands in the brick plaza of the Levittown Veterans Memorial, worrying.

"They've told us we gotta get out by 8 (a.m.) Friday. But where to? I don't have any place to go."

He looks around the Bucks County Government Services center, a sprawling campus that holds the Levittown Library, an automobile impound lot and, in the distance, woods.

"We had a camp in the woods," he says. "They told us to get out three, four weeks ago. When we didn't leave, someone slashed our tents with a knife."

"Nobody knows who it was," he says. "We heard there were other camps, one in Bristol — same thing happened. A lot of tents cut up on the same day. Coincidence, right?"

He is one of a half-dozen men who have lived on the grounds of the memorial, on and off, for at least a year. Complaints have rolled in, including from veterans. ("It's desecration," one veteran said last week.)

Hilgar is resigned. "I won't leave unless I'm served papers. Where do I go?"

"The economy got me," he says. "I just couldn't afford to pay my rent anymore. I was residing in Morrisville the past seven years. Once things tanked in 2008, 2009, you know, with the housing thing, that was it for me. I had a great job. I used to work at (a bar in Falls). I worked there for five years. I used to open the place up six

days a week. I was the maintenance man in the morning and I became the cook."

"Economy crashes; they laid me off. And, unfortunately, they were paying me under the table, so I couldn't collect unemployment. Before that, I was doing very well."

"I understand why they don't want us here," he says of the memorial, "but I got no place to go."

There is a large homeless shelter run by the Family Service Association just a short walk from the veterans memorial.

"You gotta be on a list to get in there, and that takes forever," he says.

He looks at the government services building, a squat brick box.

"There's a guard over there. I think he's a substitute for the regular guy. He's come around every morning, like 5 a.m. waking us up, 'reminding' us we gotta be out by Friday. We'll see about Friday."

Friday arrives, cold and gray. At 6:30 a.m. the homeless men are up, helping each other fold their tents. They place them in two shopping carts, then roll the carts to a hiding place.

Chris Hilgar isn't there. A homeless man in a red baseball cap, who asks to be identified only as "Joe A," says most of the men have made arrangements to leave, but he and some of the others have no place to go.

"I've been trying to look for a different spot where we can hide out," he says. "I mean, I'm homeless a hair over a month, but I just started a new job. I'm not trying to stay on the streets forever. I'm just trying to lay low while I build money and get outta here."

The men are cold. They

head off to a McDonald's for coffee. As they do, Chris Hilgar strolls up to the veterans memorial.

"I got into the shelter. Got the call yesterday," he says.

Hilgar was also in the hospital for two days — pneumonia, probably.

"You know the biggest reason for homelessness is lack of affordable housing. And no jobs. They keep talking about all these jobs. Millions of jobs. Where are they? Then you realize what they're talking about are \$7.50 an hour Burger King jobs," he says.

The 8 a.m. hour comes and goes, but no county authorities arrive. Hilgar appears stressed. A group of veterans arrives. They want the homeless men out. Near the woods, county workers arrive with a backhoe.

"My (shopping) cart is there," Hilgar says. "Everything I have is in it. They aren't going to bury it, are they? I hope not."

He watches the backhoe roll slowly from the trailer that hauled it.

"I better go get my bike. I can't lose my wheels," he says.

Hilgar retrieves the bicycle, which is locked to a pole. Walking it back to the memorial, he turns to check the backhoe.

The men don't bury his cart. Instead, they roll the machine toward the veterans memorial. They dig a hole and insert a pole with a sign. The sign says no loiterers.

"The sign is for us," one of the homeless men says — a permanent memorial marker unceremoniously dedicated.

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Vets protest homeless camping at memorial

The veterans said the homeless presence discouraged others from going to the memorial and honoring the fallen.

By MATTHEW TURNER
STAFF WRITER

A group of nine local veterans stood in front of the Levittown Veterans Memorial on Friday morning, quietly making their presence known to a smaller group of homeless people who stood in a nearby parking lot.

The homeless people had been sleeping on benches and in tents around the monument.

And the Delaware Valley Vietnam Veterans wanted it to stop.

"It's a total desecration, what's going on here," said Joe Hogan, a Vietnam veteran from Bristol Township. "These are local heroes."

Ed Sabol, another Vietnam veteran from Bristol Township, said the memorial has looked like "a shopping center" with several shopping carts strewn about. The carts were pushed away to a nearby trash can Friday morning.

Veteran Eddie Speller, of Bristol Township, said he believes the homeless go there because of the access to several benches to sleep on. He said he "sympathizes with them," but said they should find another place to stay that is not "sacred ground."

The veterans said the homeless presence discouraged others from going to the memorial and honoring the fallen.

The veterans complained to county officials over the last few weeks, county spokesman Chris Edwards said. County employees erected "No trespassing" signs Friday, effectively kicking out the homeless people. The signs also prohibited camping, littering



KIM WEIMER / PHOTOJOURNALIST

Veterans Joe Hogan, Jesse Hill, Eddie Speller and Dan Fraley meet with Morris Derry, the founder of homeless advocacy organization No More Pain, at the Levittown Veterans Memorial on Friday. The local veterans urged the Bucks County government to prevent a group of homeless people from camping at the memorial.

and "indecent activity."

Edwards said the county reached out to the homeless people to explain the situation before erecting the signs.

"It's a county property, so it's a safety matter as much as anything else," Edwards said. "They (Bucks County Human Services) are really seeking to find other avenues for these folks to have permanent shelter."

The memorial is located on the grounds of the county Government Services Center on New Falls Road in Bristol Township. The Bucks County Emergency Homeless Shelter is nearby.

The memorial features a plaque listing the names of 27 Bristol Township residents who died serving in Vietnam. The "No trespassing" signs are posted around the perimeter.

Morris Derry, the founder of the nonprofit organization No More Pain, a group that aids the homeless, called the signs ridiculous.

"I get the concerns, but this is not the way to deal with it," Derry said. "I am so afraid of where these guys are going to go. They don't know where."

The veterans, the homeless and homeless advocates did not speak at first. When

they broke their silence, the groups had a friendly dialogue, agreeing more is needed to help the homeless in the county. Derry told them a homeless veteran stayed in the memorial recently, and the veterans asked him to put them in touch with any homeless veterans so they could assist them.

"We need to investigate an empty, larger building because one shelter ain't going to do it," Speller said.

Joyce Bloom, a homeless person, was at the memorial talking to friends when the veterans arrived. She currently lives in the homeless shelter, but previously stayed at the memorial for about a year. She works and is saving money to relocate.

"I'm going to be putting some money away to hopefully get an apartment with my fiance," Bloom said.

The homeless people freely left the memorial Friday. Edwards said park rangers and county security officers will monitor the memorial in the future to enforce the new rules. Edwards was aware of "no serious criminal activity" occurring there.

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