

Pleasanton: 'Stand Down' cranks up to help veterans in need



Army veteran Chuck Rudicil, of Hayward, and six-year-old long-haired chihuahua Tika check in with Tri Valley Animal Rescue foster program director and board of directors member Sue James at the East Bay Stand Down in Pleasanton, Calif., on Thursday Sept. 15, 2016. The rescue provides veterinary services, care and boarding for pets as veterans attend the three day Stand Down event at the Alameda County Fairgrounds. (Anda Chu/Bay Area News Group)

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PLEASANTON — Mike Weber was working hard at the Alameda County Fairgrounds this week, directing hundreds of volunteers in myriad tasks big and small in getting the East Bay Stand Down to come to life.

The director of logistics for this event that brings military veterans, mostly those who are homeless and need physical and legal services, Weber is businesslike in getting events set up and running, telling volunteers what to do and where to go and helping them do their jobs. But ask him about his time in the Army serving in Vietnam, his body and his lips stop moving, and he gets emotional. Then he talks about “survivor’s guilt.”

“I came home alone — I left comrades there ... there’s an incompleteness about that,” Weber said. “This sort of mission helps to heal some of that issue.”

Helping at-risk vets is what East Bay Stand Down is all about, and some 3,000 volunteers from all over the Bay Area and beyond convene every two years to do it. In recent years, it has taken place on the eastern edge of the Alameda County Fairgrounds. Pre-screened and pre-approved veterans — a maximum of 500 — are brought to a pop-up tent village where they live for four days. They eat and sleep there, gets three square meals each day and can take advantage of a variety of services ranging from help finding transitional or permanent housing, clearing up legal situations, getting medical or dental care, getting haircuts and many other services.

These services are crucial to helping these vets — many who served in Vietnam, and about 50 of them this year women — get back on their feet.

“All too often they do not receive proper treatment and/or care,” said EBSD Director Jerry Yahiro of Danville, a Vietnam veteran. “This often leads to loss of self-esteem, breakup of family relationships and often suicide or even worse. At Stand Down, we try to break this vicious cycle of homelessness and despair by providing access to all the services that he/she may need and is entitled to.”

“We call it a ‘hand up,’ not a hand-out,” said Weber, a Danville resident. For homeless or couch-surfing veterans, he said, it’s easy for a simple traffic ticket or other minor infraction to turn into a bigger legal issue, if they can’t be reached with a summons.

“Pretty soon, you get a whole umbrella of that (stuff) piling up on you,” he said. “You can get buried pretty fast.”

Cindy Pieslak, left, volunteer coordinator for East Bay Stand Down, guides a couple of volunteers to their tasks.

The veterans arrive at the fairgrounds on Thursday. Wednesday, the Stand Down’s corner of the fairgrounds was abuzz with active-duty military in fatigues mingling with volunteers in special T-shirts doing everything from setting up tents to unpacking supplies to setting up electrical connections.

The military people helping are mostly Air National Guard members, with some Army combat engineers, lending their expertise and muscle through a program called “innovative readiness training,” Weber said, in which military units are given community-based assignments that can provide training for a variety of civilian-

military partnership situations. Almost two dozen area businesses and civic groups also provide support for the Stand Down.

Connie Combs of Pleasanton, a volunteer at East Bay Stand Down 2016, shows a photo of her wedding to husband Farel. They met while in the Army, assigned to Germany in 1965. Sam Richards/Staff

Most of the Stand Down volunteers are either active or retired military, or family or friends of those who are. Connie Combs of Pleasanton met her husband Farel while both were serving in the Army in Germany in the mid-1960s. This weekend she's helping coordinate Stand Down volunteers.

"I love my veterans, and this is a way to say 'thank you' for all they've done and are doing," she said.

As a former member of the Alameda County Fairgrounds board, Ario Ysitt of Sunol has plenty of experience on Stand Down turf. He also knows all too well about the plight of many veterans; his brother was a homeless Vietnam vet.

"That's a big motivation for me to be here," Ysitt said. "I'm here from 7 in the morning until 7 at night. Some who are helping here got help themselves and have come back."

Coming back to help is a common theme at this event.

"Many of these people were wounded following their (military) service, in their spirit and their mind," Weber said. "And we don't leave our wounded behind."