

When Vietnam veteran Gerald Corsiglia hears news from Iraq, he can only shake his head and worry for the American soldiers over there.

He knows too well the dangers of combat. He knows what it is like living day to day with someone shooting at you.

He also knows the pitfalls of coming home.

Corsiglia, a tall thin man with a soft voice, had trouble fitting back into a peacetime environment. Drinking and joblessness exacerbated his problems until one day in 2001 he found himself unemployed and homeless.

He worries that some veterans of the Iraq war could experience similar difficulties and, like him, end up on the street.

"Like me, some of them might not really see much in the future," Corsiglia, 57, said from **Benilde Hall** in Kansas City, a residential substance abuse facility that works with veterans and other homeless people. "You're just depressed, don't fit in."

For some returning veterans, the struggles of the home front - paying bills, finding jobs, reuniting with family - can lead to despair and homelessness.

Many of these veterans had mental health or substance abuse problems when they joined the service. Others developed addiction and mental illness during their enlistment and saw their lives spiral out of control after their discharge.

Now, with the United States embroiled in a bloody conflict in Iraq, social service providers expect to see another generation of veterans on the street.

Staff at the Dwight D. Eisenhower VA Medical Center in Leavenworth have already seen homeless Iraq war veterans, and they expect to see more, said Dora Robinson, acting director of the Domiciliary Residential Rehabilitation Treatment Program.

"The potential (for homelessness) is there depending on the situation they were in when they left," Robinson said. "Did they have social support? Were they without family? Do they have a job? Even those veterans with families, if they come back with mental health issues, I don't know how much support the family can provide or how much they can cope."

The Department of Veterans Affairs estimates 313,000 veterans were homeless nationwide in 2003. In Kansas City, about 1,800 vets lived on the streets last year, the VA says.

An analysis of the 252 male homeless veterans seen by the Kansas City VA Medical Center in 2003 showed that their average age was about 47. Most came from shelters and had not received VA services before. Nearly 70 percent reported problems with alcohol, and about 60 percent requested drug detoxification.

"For some of these guys, they went back to their roots, their old neighborhood," said Richard Ivy, the homeless veteran outreach coordinator for the Department of Veterans Affairs' regional office in St. Louis. He also spends time in Kansas City. "They hook up with people they used to run with and did things they shouldn't."

Women veterans also land on the street. Fort Leavenworth averages about 10 homeless women veterans a month in its program. Some women veterans become homeless because they don't realize they are eligible for benefits. Others have no place to leave their children so they can seek help, while still others are victims of

sexual abuse by fellow soldiers and distrust any program connected with the military.

Janet, a Persian Gulf War Army veteran who declined to give her last name, was honorably discharged in 1994. She spent 10 years roving the country from job to job and often was homeless. Eventually, she was diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder.

"My anger was intense. I learned to walk away from someone before I killed someone," she said, explaining why she lost jobs. "My blood would boil. I can feel it in my body. An explosion of energy. Skin crawls. Intense energy. It came out as anger. I'd kick my tires, yell and scream."

The lack of jobs, especially in rural areas, also contributes to homelessness among veterans as it does the general population.

"A lot of vets trying to get jobs face a lot of barriers, even at McDonald's," said Jennifer Templeton, the coordinator for health care for the homeless veterans program at Harry S. Truman Memorial Veterans' Hospital in Columbia. "Employers want to hire younger people. They get a middle-aged vet and the employer can easily hire someone younger."

Templeton recently worked with three men and one woman in their early- to mid-20s who were preparing to go to Iraq and then were discharged and became homeless. Three of them were medically discharged and one received an honorable discharge. Templeton would not elaborate further, citing confidentiality.

"A lot suffer from mental illness like schizophrenia," Templeton said. "Sometimes it's only apparent after their discharge or they have a schizophrenic break while in the service."

Research by the National Coalition for the Homeless this year found that the veterans who were at greatest risk of homelessness were those who served during the late Vietnam and post-Vietnam era. These veterans had little exposure to combat but appeared to have increased rates of mental illness and addiction problems. Faced with limited opportunities, low wages and a lack of affordable housing, these veterans were especially vulnerable to homelessness.

Vietnam era veteran Michael Childs said he was addicted to drugs and alcohol when he joined the Navy in 1972. He did not see combat and was honorably discharged in 1974. His drug addiction led to him being homeless last year, he said.

"I'm from the '60s generation," Childs, 52, said from **Benilde Hall**. "It was almost a social thing to experiment with drugs. I was completely crazy on drugs and drinking."

Many veterans such as Childs started using alcohol and drugs at a young age, said Patricia Durham, a mental health social worker at the Kansas City VA Medical Center.

"They join the military to get away from problems," she said, "and those problems are still with them when they get out."

Corsiglia began drinking before he joined the Army in 1967. He considered himself addicted to alcohol by the time he was honorably discharged. Recently he was diagnosed as 60 percent disabled because of post-traumatic stress disorder. He said some of his postwar drinking was self-medicating his stress disorder.

"I thought it controlled my anger," he said of his drinking during these years. "I didn't start getting fired until the last 20 years. I'd get caught drinking and put through a program."

One such program, the Kansas City Rescue Mission, provided shelter and other services to 516 veterans between July 1, 2002, and Sept. 15 of this year.

"If a person enters the military with a substance abuse problem, there's a strong possibility it will be made worse by their service because of the stress," said Will Howard, assistant to the executive director, a Vietnam combat veteran and recovering alcoholic. "They get into addiction and it becomes not just a veteran experience, but the whole addiction experience as well. You become a marginal person."

Corsiglia hopes his days of marginal living are over. He encourages Iraq veterans to seek the help they need and not wait until their lives come apart.

"A lot will be coming back with problems," he said. "There's a lot of stress out there. A lot are National Guardsmen and didn't expect what they're getting into. I hope they get taken care of right."

To reach Malcolm Garcia, call (816) 234-4328 or send e-mail to mgarcia@kcstar.com.

How to get help

Kansas City VA Medical Center, 4801 E. Linwood Blvd., (816) 861-4700.

Kansas City Vet Center, 301 E. Armour Blvd., Suite 301, (816) 753-1866.

In Leavenworth, contact the Domiciliary Residential Rehabilitation Treatment Program at the VA Eastern Kansas Health Care System- Dwight D. Eisenhower VA Medical Center, 4101 S. 4th St., 1-(800) 952-8387, Ext. 3014 or 3049.

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Richard Ivy, the Department of Veterans Affairs

Photo (color)

SHANE KEYSER/The Kansas City Star

Gerald Corsiglia, a Vietnam War vet, said he had trouble adjusting to a peaceful environment. In 2001 he found himself jobless and homeless.

CITATION (AGLC STYLE)

MALCOLM GARCIA, 'Veterans face pitfalls of coming back home', *Kansas City Star, The* (online), 20 Sep 2004 A1
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