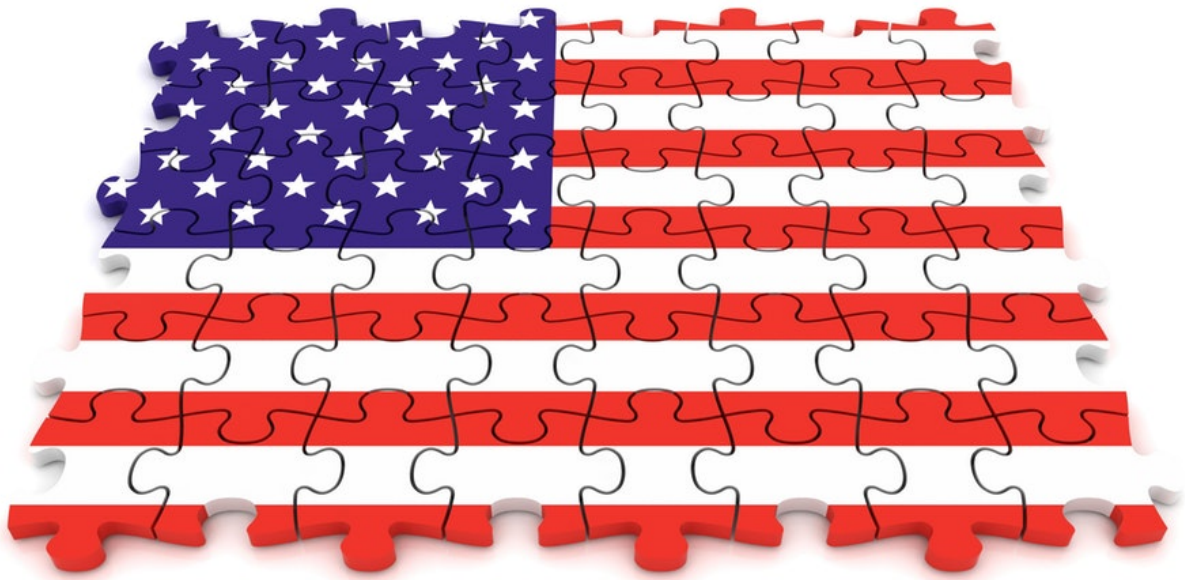


Help and hope for veterans

Retired military join forces to help others piece together benefits, jobs and life in North Texas



(Getty Images)

By MIKE THARP

His pupils pinpoints, Derick, a 39-year-old former Marine, shuffles through the front door of the Veterans Center of North Texas in Plano.

It's 96 degrees outside. Derick carries all of his stuff in two black plastic trash bags. His arms are tattooed shoulder to wrist. His eyelashes and buzz cut are bleached blond from the sun.

Derick asks, "Can I get some snacks and water?"

Pete Young, a retired Army major, says, "Sure," and hands Derick two energy bars and a bottle of water.

Young is vice president of operations for the center. Derick is a client. "I was walking through the parking lot," Derick recalls about how he found the center. "I'm homeless. I work construction part-time. I got to get a new backpack."

The center's volunteers are trying to help Derick obtain his DD Form 214, a military service discharge document essential for any veteran to get services or benefits. "I was a private when I got out at Camp Pendleton" California, one of two main Marine boot camps, he says. He doesn't know what happened to his DD-214 or if he ever had one. "I'm taking this on myself to do it," he says.

A bunch of retired Army, Marine, Navy and Air Force veterans started the center in 2014. They realized there was no central clearinghouse in North Texas to let veterans know what could be done for them.

They found a place, around 1,000 square feet, near the Collin County clerk's office. They repainted the walls and, with the help of donations, kicked in to get office furniture, carpet, phones and computers.

Today, they know more than 160,000 veterans live in North Texas and some 14% of the homeless population are veterans.

Paul Hendricks, a retired Air Force career officer, is president of the center. He says it has 38 volunteers who helped 1,200 veterans last year. The volunteers spent 8,000 hours helping veterans and their families in six counties — Collin, Grayson, Cooke, Hunt, Fannin and Rockwall.

The center isn't a one-off service. The volunteers make a series of follow-up calls to clients to let them know they care. They monitor clients for six months, doing what they call a "buddy check. Whoever calls us, we help," says Ray Norton, a Navy veteran from Vietnam. "We're not done till they're done."

Amazingly, after the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have been going on for nearly two decades, the average age of clients is 57. "There are a number of Vietnam vets who feel the country has discriminated against them," Hendricks says. In one case, the center helped an 85-year-old vet find a job.

Key issues for clients include unemployment or underemployment; financial management; immediate-need funds; shelter and long-term housing; mental illness; medical and disability claims; and lifestyle issues.

In what Young describes as "wrapping our arms around the tens of thousands of veterans in North Texas," the center puts clients in touch with local, county, state and national agencies that can help them.

In a back room, Derick munches on an energy bar. His eyes don't focus. Young reminds him that he has to check in to a Dallas shelter by 3 p.m. if he wants a place to sleep tonight, other than the streets. He also tells him where to go for a mobile shower service on Wednesdays. His head on a swivel, Derick says, "OK."

He says he filed a claim once for PTSD and hearing loss but doesn't know what became of it. "I did really good in boot camp," the Richardson native says. "I'd recommend this place. There are good people here."

Then he walks back into the sunlight.

Mike Tharp is a former reporter for The Wall Street Journal. He served in the Army in Vietnam and was awarded the Bronze Star. He writes about veterans and other

