

### Wednesday, April 2, 2008

Joe Soukup, a homeless veteran who survived Vietnam with a Purple Heart, decided to end his life in a suburban shopping center on February 14, 2007.

He had been living in his truck for three years, often parking at the Mayfair Shopping Center in Commack. On this particular day, an ice-storm was bearing down on Long Island and the truck was almost out of gas.

At that point, Joe thought there was nothing left to live for. He figured he had just enough gas to drive to a bridge. There, he would let the ice storm take him to the death he avoided in Vietnam.

Then, something happened. Maybe it was divine intervention. Maybe it was common sense. Joe decided if he was going to die, he should do it with dignity at a Veterans hospital. He calculated that he had just enough gas to make it to the VA Hospital in Northport and he drove there.

When he arrived, a social worker pleaded with Joe to go to a Salvation Army shelter. He refused, noting that he would have to give up his home -- his truck -- to pay the fee. The VA staffer said, "You keep your truck. I'll personally pay the fee."

That was the first time Joe felt like he had received help from the government.

The second time was when he came to my office. Tom McGlennon, a veterans advocate, persuaded Joe to put aside his distrust of government and let my office help him seek an increase in disability payments for his Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. Joe was just starting to turn his life around. He kicked a drug habit. He took anger management counseling. He began understanding that the flashbacks of grisly combat in Vietnam were just flashbacks. He was diagnosed with PTSD, but the government gave him a senselessly low rating. It took months of phone calls, frequent pestering, and navigation through an endless bureaucratic maze to get Joe Soukup what he was owed. At one point, we were even caught between conflicting decisions by two separate branches of the VA. Then, on March 27 I called Joe to tell him that we secured a retroactive payment of \$57,834 and monthly checks of \$2,527.

After a long silence, Joe said, "That's a lot of money."

We helped rescue Joe Soukup from homelessness. But every night in America, there are an estimated 154,000 veterans who are homeless. Twice as many veterans have experienced homelessness at some point. And 23% of all homeless people are veterans. They served our

country, won medals and fought battles but now shiver in the cardboard shelters and trucks they call home.

The federal government has a fundamental, "buck-stops-here" obligation to leave no veteran homeless. And yet, the government has looked the other way. Or it has not opened its eyes wide enough to see the Joe Soukups under bridges and in parking lots across America. Or they have made the callous decision that in an era of limited budgets, it is more important to provide subsidies to oil companies, HMOs, and financial lenders.

There can be no higher priority than ending the homelessness of veterans in America. There can be no greater shame if we fail.

Sure, my office helped rescue Joe Soukup from homelessness. That's one down...and 153,999 to go.