

# The Salt Lake Tribune

<http://www.sltrib.com>

## Homeless female vets find few services

By Kimberly Hefling  
The Associated Press

Salt Lake Tribune

Updated: 12/18/2009 11:03:41 PM MST

# The Salt Lake Tribune

<http://www.sltrib.com>

**Long Beach, Calif.** » The \$15,000 that former Army Pvt. Margaret Ortiz had in the bank when she left Iraq is long gone, spent on alcohol and cocaine.

By the time she found her way to a program run by the nonprofit U.S. Vets for homeless female veterans in this Southern California city, she had slept in San Diego on the beach or anywhere she could find after a night of partying. One morning, she woke up behind a trash bin, her pants torn, with no memory of what happened.

Instead of helping her forget her six months in Iraq, where she said she faced attacks on her compound and sexual harassment from fellow soldiers, the alcohol and drugs brought flashbacks and raging blackouts. She said she tried to kill herself.

"You knew something was wrong with you, but you didn't know what was wrong with you. Nobody knew, and so you couldn't really handle it," said Ortiz, 27, from atop her twin bed in a plain dorm-style room, a black 4th Infantry Division ball cap on her head.

Ortiz is one of the new faces among America's homeless veterans.

They're younger than homeless male veterans and more likely to bring children. Their number has doubled in the past decade, and there are an estimated 6,500 homeless female veterans on any given night -- about 5 percent of the total homeless veterans population.

But women-only programs such as the one Ortiz participates in are few.

"It is always hard to find a place or resources or help when you are homeless," said Sen. Patty Murray, a member of the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee. "It is almost impossible if you are a woman. Most of the V.A. facilities cater to men, and you can't take a mom with two little kids and put her in the middle of a homeless center with 30 or 40 male veterans," said Murray, D-Wash.

The distressed economy only made things worse.

"People think we're just coming out of the military and we should have our stuff together," said Tiffany Belle, 33, a former Navy sailor who served in the Philippines after the Sept. 11 attacks and lives with Ortiz at the U.S. Vets program. "It gets really hard. Some people don't know where to go, what to do."

Like male veterans, many homeless female veterans face substance abuse and mental health problems. Many also struggle with sexual trauma that occurred in the military.

Ortiz said in Iraq she dealt with harassment from male soldiers who talked to her like she was a prostitute. She was a driver and her convoys regularly were attacked, she said.

She said she's particularly bothered by an incident in which she was 40 feet from a building destroyed by a mortar where she was living in Tikrit.

A few months after she returned to the U.S., she was back in California, planning to go to college, living with her parents and burning through her money on drugs and alcohol. She eventually ended up in a psychiatric hospital after attempting suicide, and later in in-treatment programs for drugs and sexual trauma.

"I didn't know how to process it, and I didn't know what to process because there was so much of it," she said.

During difficult economic times, even those who haven't yet cut ties from the military can face homelessness.

Sgt. Alta Jackson, 58, joined the Army nearly 30 years ago, and remains in the Reserves while she lives at the U.S. Vets site. Before she deployed to Iraq in 2005, she said she lost her job as a custodian. Stationed south of Baghdad, she said her camp endured almost nightly attacks that destroyed structures near her and injured fellow soldiers.

Back home from war, she was taking care of her ailing father in his 90s. The two lived on his pension. After his death, she bounced from relative to relative, some of whom were getting evicted amid the housing crisis. Everywhere she looked for work, she was turned down.

"People just don't want to hire you because you're too old," Jackson said.

At the same time, she was angry and depressed. Once outgoing, she told family members not to come see her unannounced.

"Everyone was telling me that I've changed," Jackson said. "I remember telling them, quit telling me I've changed because I haven't changed. I'm the same. You guys have changed."

She continues to look for work. Her car was repossessed while she was deployed, so she's had to take the train or bus to look for jobs. She faces the possibility of getting deployed again and worries about the future.

"Sometimes I feel really good about it and I'm upbeat," said Jackson. "Sometimes, when I sit and think about certain things, I get depressed. I get discouraged because it's really hard to say what the future holds."

The program where the women live is one of fewer than 10 nationally that receives money from the Department of Veterans Affairs to provide care in specialized programs for homeless female veterans. It provides housing, but also employment help and treatment for sexual trauma.

Administrators had worked with male veterans for years and assumed the same types of programs worked for women. They quickly learned when they opened the women's program in 2001 that the women's issues were more complex and required longer treatment.

"They really have different ways of dealing with things," said Dr. Diane West, a nurse and therapist who administers the program.

They also found that men and women in the same structure didn't work. A majority of the women had experienced sexual trauma and craved privacy. Some became involved with the men, which complicated their treatment. They were moved to their own building in 2005.

Today, it offers 38 beds for women without children and expanded to add rooms for eight women with children. West has gotten calls from women needing help from as far away as Massachusetts. Among those calling for help, West said, was an Iraq veteran with a 3-month old.

Recently, V.A. Secretary Eric Shinseki pledged to end homelessness among veterans in five years and specifically mentioned the need to help women veterans.

The V.A. is far more proactive than it's ever been, and recognizes the need to be more family friendly, said Pete Dougherty, director of V.A.'s homeless veterans programs. It supports legislation sponsored by Murray that seeks to expand government dollars to programs that target women veterans and the children of the homeless. It also wants to expand on a partnership between the V.A. and the Department of Housing and Urban Development that provides permanent public housing and case management treatment services for veterans.

Close Window

Send To Printer