

OPERATION CHILLOUT

Catholic Charities agency reaches out to veterans during brutally cold winter days

By **CECILE SAN AGUSTIN**

Reporter

PATERSON — As a severe cold wave not seen in years hits the area, conditions can be especially harsh for many who have no place to live. A significant population of those who are homeless includes veterans. At diocesan Catholic Charities' Catholic Family and Community Services (CFCS) in collaboration with Catholic Charities of Newark, its Supportive Services for Veteran Families (SSVF) program, which is in force in seven N.J. counties, helps these veterans in their time of need.

Six offices are access sites (see list) for backpacks provided by Operation Chillout, a grassroots interfaith coalition founded in 2000 by concerned volunteers to help a group of Vietnam veterans living under a railroad trestle in northern N.J.

The backpacks include warm winter clothing such as sweatshirts, knit caps, socks and gloves as well as travel size toiletries. Operation Chillout has packed 650 of these bags and already delivered more than half of them to homeless veterans and other persons living on the streets in Dover, Newton, Morristown, Paterson, Passaic, Hackensack and Newark during December with deliveries expected until February in several N.J. counties and three counties in Pennsylvania.

"As we go through the winter, we will be here to help all those on the streets, espe-

cially veterans. We continuously get so many calls reaching out to us," said Deacon Ray Chimileski of St. Luke Parish in Long Valley, where Operation Chillout is headquartered.

According to Operation Chillout, 7,000 military veterans in N.J. are in need of

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DAVID PEARSON, OUTREACH COORDINATOR,
SUPPORTIVE SERVICES FOR VETERAN FAMILIES

housing, medical and employment assistance. A mission for Operation Chillout is also to help break the cycle of chronic homelessness not only during the winter months but also all year long. Deacon Chimileski said, "We hope to venture out further and assist people with job training. It can be very easy to get depressed and be trapped on the street once somebody is there. We are here to offer hope."

Deacon Chimileski recalled a group of homeless people living near River Street in Paterson. "When we started this project, there were a group of 20 people living near the river. Now, there are eight people. Some got jobs. Some returned home to their fam-

ilies. I consider this a small success and also thank the Franciscan Friars of Renewal who also minister there as well," said Deacon Chimileski.

Since October, when the veterans program launched at CFCS, 40 families have been helped said David Pearson, outreach coordinator for SSVF.

"Many of the vets served during the Korean War or Vietnam. We've even had a 91-year-old vet, who served in World War II seek our assistance," said Pearson. "There has also been more and more vets coming home from the Iraq and Afghanistan wars also in need."

In addition to providing the Operation Chillout backpacks, SSVF helps with rental assistance and moving costs, utility payments, childcare expenses, transportation costs and more. There will also be a Veteran Service Providers Stakeholder Action Meeting from 1:30 to 3 p.m. Thursday, Jan. 30 at the Department of Veterans Affairs in Totowa.

Pearson said, "It's such an honor to give back to the people who have given everything for this country and give us the freedom we have. We also thank Deacon Ray and Operation Chillout who have done an excellent job of creating these cold weather packs and providing veterans with the warmth and dignity they deserve."

For more information on Operation Chillout, visit www.operationchillout.org

Access sites for Supportive Services for Veteran Families

These locations will provide Operation Chillout Backpacks and other services for homeless veterans.

Passaic County

- SSVF Office 24 DeGrasse St., Paterson
David Pearson (973) 818-3601

Morris and Sussex counties

- Hope House, 19-26 Belmont Ave.,
Dover, Meghan Butler (973) 818-3606

Bergen County

- SSVF Office, 57 Pink St., Hackensack,
Anna Rizzo (973) 220-5749

Essex County

- 481 Sanford Ave., Newark, Adria
Goldenkranz (973) 399-1333

Union County

- SSVF Office 505 S. Avenue East,
Cranford, Medina Wingo (908) 497-3940

Hudson County

- SSVF Office, 591 Summit Ave., Jersey
City, Jennifer Vasquez (201) 656-5101

Hotline: (855) 767-8387