

# Something to Chat About

## A VFW Post in California donated more than \$600,000 to a local program that fights veteran homelessness

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During the dog days of summer last year, kindness found its way to several struggling veterans in Chico, California, who had fallen on hard times and ended up homeless.

As if snatched from the pages of Charles Dickens' "Great Expectations," it all began with an anonymous benefactor who in early July approached VFW Post 1555 members in Chico with a checkbook and questions.

The benefactor, a frequent donor to the Post's relief fund, wanted to do more, according to Post 1555 Commander Mike Halldorson, who recalled the donor's urgency to help veterans.

"He did not serve, but he said he had a heart for veterans and wanted to help any who did [serve]," Halldorson said. "The initial donation was for \$25,000 and had no restrictions on where it was to be used. The benefactor said he wanted to help any veteran with [items such as] rent, utility bills, food or repair of a vehicle."

Then the benefactor turned to VFW member Larry Wahl, his contact at Post 1555, and asked what else he could do and what would be most helpful for veterans in Chico.

Given some time to think about the question and craft a plan, Wahl, a former Chico councilman and current Butte County supervisor for District 2, came up with the Chico Housing Action Team (CHAT) from his days in government. Founded in 2013, CHAT is a volunteer program dedicated to aiding different categories of people in need of affordable housing around Chico.

"We presented it to our benefactor, and he signed the check that very day," Halldorson said of a \$600,000 donation. "It's hard to understand that anyone would give that kind of money if your heart wasn't in it."

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### **‘MAKE THIS DREAM HAPPEN’**

Post 1555 leadership began working on a proposal for CHAT, accruing information and finding the best possible way to make use of the \$600,000.

Despite the nonprofit’s ability to find housing accommodations for displaced civilians, Halldorson and Wahl remained adamant on the donation going strictly to veterans needing a hand up.

They, along with the unnamed benefactor and other Post 1555 members, stipulated that the donation be used for the purchase of two houses, each receiving \$300,000, and that only veterans live in these homes.

“We had investigated their program to see if it was a good fit for the Post to make this dream happen,” Halldorson said. “We expressed that the funds were for assisting in the purchase of housing for veterans in need and to facilitate very low rental rates for them.”

With CHAT onboard, their representatives presented Post 1555 leadership with four housing options at various sites in Chico, about 90 miles north of the state’s capital, Sacramento.

“Larry Wahl and I accompanied Bob Trausch, from CHAT, to view three possible houses in both north and south Chico after one of the houses had been removed from the market,” Halldorson said. “We selected the ones that eventually became the two purchased.”

CHAT worked fast, using its database system to identify housing needs among veterans. They identified eight veterans in need of a hand up in and around Chico, splitting them up in groups of four to each of the two properties.

“There’s a process for finding veterans. We’ve got veterans like me working at CHAT, so it’s been part of what we’ve done over the years,” said Trausch, a CHAT co-founder a Marine veteran. “They get to us through local VSOs, word of mouth and Coordinated Entry, which is a 211 number where they answer serious questions and get a rating that then gets passed on to us.”

### **‘BLESSED AND EXTREMELY GRATEFUL’**

Among those first eight veterans chosen was Vernon Carel, an Army veteran.

“I have struggled,” Carel said. “This housing has given me hope and allowed me to get on with my life.”

Like Carel, Darwin Sager, a Marine veteran, had endured his own share of hardships, which included losing his home during the 2018 Camp Fire disaster that remains California’s deadliest and most destructive wildfire to date.

“I was living in motels after the Camp Fire, and my wife passed,” Sager said. “With savings exhausted, this gives me a roof over my head that I can afford.”

Out of the eight original veterans selected by CHAT, only one is a woman. For Teresa Preston, a Marine veteran, the opportunity for a fresh start is a blessing.

“I feel privileged,” Preston said. “Blessed and extremely grateful to have such an opportunity.”

Preston and the other seven veterans began moving into one of the two houses in October, some 60 days after the properties had been purchased and refurbished. The swift process was celebrated during a small dedication ceremony on move-in day.

Halldorson, Wahl and Post Sr. Vice Commander Brianna Farrara attended the ceremony, which included the unveiling of installed placards with the VFW’s Maltese Cross and “VFW Post 1555” on them.

“The housed veterans came out for photo ops and thanked us profusely, wanting to know what the VFW was all about,” Halldorson said. “A few did not want their pictures taken, and we honored that as well.”

Trausch, who co-founded CHAT in 2013, attended the dedication and admitted that it was an emotional ceremony.

“It brought tears to my eyes,” Trausch said. “It’s our passion to get people off the street, so it was amazing to see that the VFW was there to help us. A lot of these vets are suffering, and they don’t trust society any longer. It’s up to us to build up that trust and help them heal.”

With the continued support of Post 1555, CHAT is now working on turning the garages of these two properties into bedrooms to house an additional veteran in each, moving the count to 10 housed veterans.

As for the anonymous benefactor, his devotion to veterans is summed up in his last conversation with Halldorson and Wahl.

“With his help, we established the veterans’ assistance committee within the Post for veterans that came to us with requests,” Halldorson said. “He also told us very firmly, ‘Whenever you need more, you just ask.’ Now for me, personally, I hear people say, ‘Thank you for your service,’ all the time, but a lot of times, they don’t know what it entails. I believe he does.”

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