



## Community & People

# 'Welcome Home' offers warm hearts in cold weather

Published December 29, 2016 at 3:01 pm

by [Gabby Landsverk](#), Sun Sailor Newspapers

Anyone who's undergone the daunting task of finding a new home knows that first step into an empty apartment or house can be more than a little intimidating. That step can be even more overwhelming if there are no boxes, no furniture, no basic necessities to fill the space – not even a radio to help break the silence.

This is reality for recently homeless veterans. While organizations such as the Minnesota Assistance Council for Veterans and the Veterans Administration can help provide veterans with housing, they're often left on their own when it comes to making the house into a home.

Hopkins Elks members Rick and Gretchen Peterson, however, are offering everything needed to make an inviting, cozy place for newly-settled veterans through a program called Welcome Home.



*Rick and Gretchen Peterson, members of the Hopkins Elks, are behind the west metro chapter of the Welcome Home project, providing recently housed veterans with beds, kitchen supplies and other items needed to turn an empty*

*apartment into a home. Since the project began in June, the Petersons and other Elks volunteers have provided home kits to 63 previously homeless veterans. (Staff photo by Gabby Landsverk)*

The organization provides home starter kits, including all the necessities such as bedding, kitchenware, lamps, appliances and basic food items.

"When they finally find a house, they literally have nothing. Not even a chair to sit on," Gretchen Peterson said. "It's the simplest things that you and I take for granted."

The project, started in June, has already served more than 63 veterans.

"It's gone very quickly," she said. "It took on a life of its own and it's turning into a pretty big deal." After hearing of home kit outreach projects in other areas, the Petersons had been trying to connect with the local VA to launch the project in their hometown chapter of the Elks, but were caught up in phone tag and red tape.

"We weren't getting any response, so we just showed up at the door one day," Gretchen said.

Reaching out in person, the Petersons quickly learned there was a need for volunteers to help address the problem of supplying vets after they found homes, but other priorities were already straining resources at the local VA. The couple, however, was more than happy to step up and fill the gap.

"I think they're stressed out trying to tackle all the things they already do," Rick Peterson said.

"We came to them and when they asked what the VA had to do, we said, 'Nothing, we'll take care of it.'"

The VA provides the names of the veterans being housed as well as contact information. The Petersons then arrive with everything necessary to make the empty apartment into a comfortable living place.

"Sometimes we're there waiting by the time they get to their new home," Gretchen Peterson said.

Her background is in computer software while his is in small business. Together, the pair have all the problem-solving, detail-oriented skills needed to launch the project; however, they needed volunteers to make it a success.

To be exact, as many as 20 to 30 other volunteers help collect and deliver donated materials through the Hopkins chapter of the Elks club.



Volunteers supply recently homeless veterans with necessary household items such as beds, cleaning supplies and other items. (Submitted photo)

Rick Peterson had been a longtime member of the Elks and convinced his wife to get involved after they were married.

“It’s been in my family pretty much since birth,” he said.

She said the club is somewhat under the radar for many people, even local residents.

“I had never heard of the Elks,” she said. “They don’t market themselves a lot and when people do know the Elks, they think of us as a bar.”

He added that it’s a great way to get to know members of the community as well as find ways to give back.

“A lot of people think of the Elks as just a bunch of older people,” Rick Peterson said. “It’s a great place to socialize but there’s a lot of giving, and a lot of opportunities to contribute ... We’ve had great volunteerism from the Elks.”

Gretchen Peterson added that the Welcome Home project has a particularly strong effect on volunteers because of the deeply personal interactions they can have with veterans.

“It really resonates with people,” she said. “You can see the immediate impact when you walk in and they literally have nothing.”

It also helps a person appreciate how lucky they have it, the couple agreed.

"It really puts things into perspective," Rick Peterson said. "People tend to make assumptions, but there's such a variety of reasons people become homeless."

The veterans' stories are all different, he said, but the one thing they have in common is that all of them are good people that ended up in a hard situation.

"Many people are just one medical bill away from becoming homeless," Gretchen Peterson added. "It's really eye-opening when you suspend your judgement and just talk to them."



*Rick Peterson, right, helped launch the Welcome Home program from veterans finding new homes in the west metro. Along with his wife, Gretchen, and other members of the Hopkins Elks, the program has provided beds and household supplies to get veterans settled into new apartments after homelessness. Also pictured is Leonard, the first veteran served by the program. (Submitted photo)*

Leonard, the first veteran the Petersons met through Welcome Home, said he had been on the street since Christmas Day 2015, living in homeless shelters since he had completed a mental health program through the VA.

"A shelter will give you a meal and a place to sleep, but that's it," he said. "When it's 9 a.m., it's time to hit the street whether it's cold or not."

When he found housing through the VA, Leonard said the Petersons were waiting for him with a Welcome Home kit and warm wishes.

"It was a great experience. I was homeless and when I got to my apartment they brought basically everything you would need to be comfortable moving in," he said. "I can't praise them enough. They really made my life start out good here."

He explained that it was not only a financial relief to receive household supplies, but also a huge boost to his morale, since he didn't have to try and figure out all things he would need and collect the items. It was also a clear sign that people care, which meant the world to his emotional wellbeing.

"It meant everything to me," Leonard said. "When I moved in here, I had a few pairs of pants, a few changes of underwear and two shirts. It really made all the difference, the stuff that they brought for me. It filled my heart."

Another of the veterans the Petersons met had been homeless for more than five years. Harold found housing through MACV, which then put him in touch with the Petersons and Welcome Home.

"They brought me a bed, stuff for my kitchen," he said. "Enough to get started for about a month. It was a really big help."

Originally from Memphis, Tennessee, Harold came to Minnesota for treatment at the Mayo Clinic after a diagnosis of prostate cancer. The illness left him unable to work and at a loss for how to make ends meet. Harold said he was incredibly grateful for the help provided by the Petersons and the other Elks.

"They're very nice people and they came to me when I needed help the most," he said. "They clearly enjoy doing what they do."



That much is obvious just from speaking to the Petersons about their work, whether they're stockpiling supplies in their own garage, bringing the supplies to homes, or following up with

the veterans with a special holiday gift.

"It's such a great feeling. It's hard to explain," Gretchen Peterson said. "It's well worth it. It's a lot of hours but it's very enjoyable to be able to do something good."

The project's impact has developed a reputation throughout the Hopkins community, as other members have seen and appreciated the work the Petersons have done.

"This is just one wonderful project that the Hopkins Elks is involved with along with many others in the Hopkins community," wrote Elks member Harriet Lodermeier in an email.

As if the Petersons weren't busy enough, another Elks project with Gretchen Peterson in a key role is Teaming up for Teens, a nonprofit which provides hygiene products for homeless youth. The program recently received an impact grant of \$10,000 to help expand the program and provide even more support for teens. Peterson said the need is much greater than people realize in the metro.

"Most people don't even think of the suburbs as having homeless youth," she said.

The Petersons are also looking into getting Welcome Home certified as a 501(c)(3) and other ways to expand, since they don't expect the need to diminish anytime soon.

"It's sad that there are so many of them out there, but we're glad we're able to help," Gretchen Peterson said. "Some people find it hard to believe that anyone would even care about them like this."

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