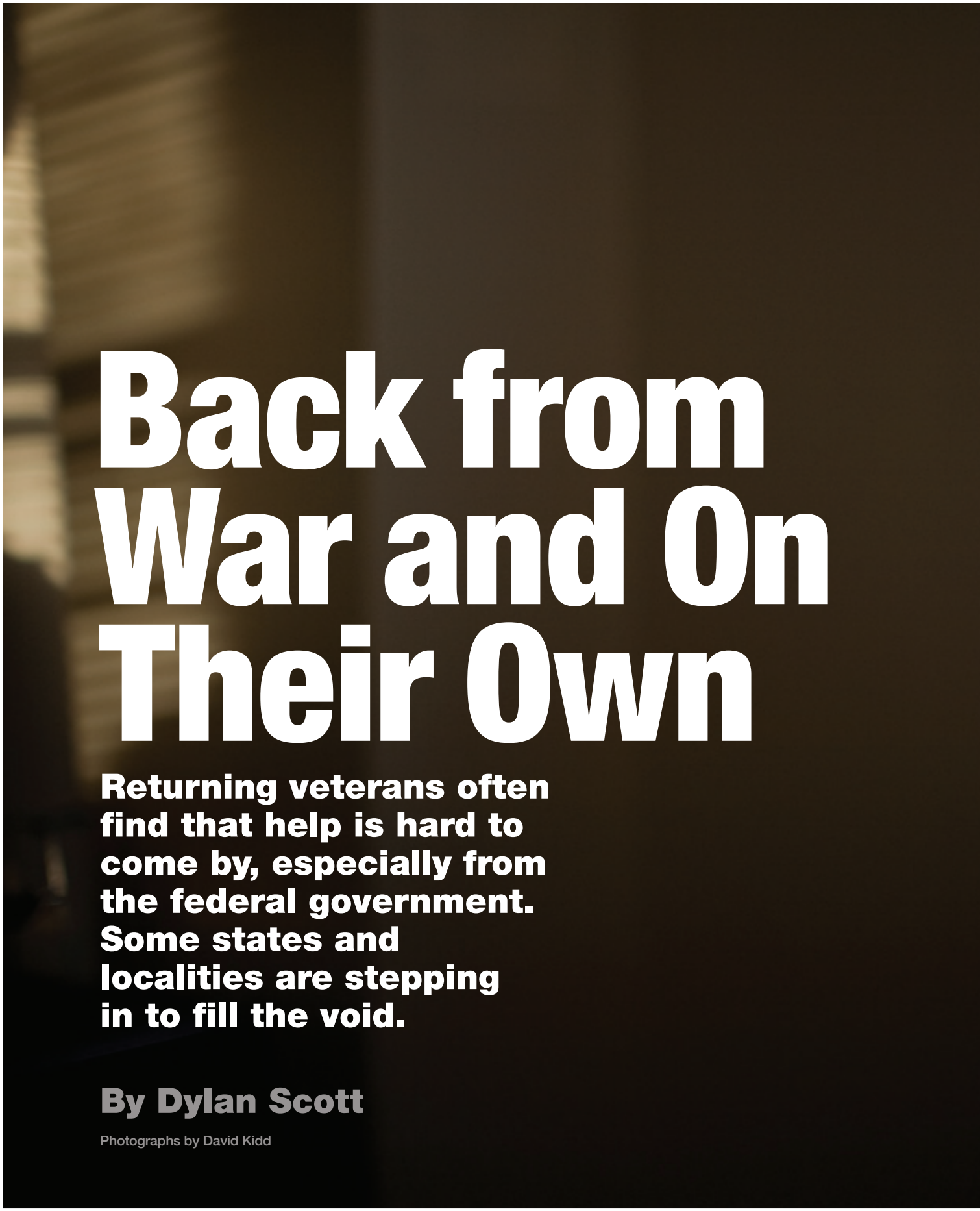


Back from War and On Their Own

Returning veterans often find that help is hard to come by, especially from the federal government. Some states and localities are stepping in to fill the void.

By Dylan Scott

Photographs by David Kidd

Unemployed Navy vet Anthony Palladino in his Utica, N.Y., apartment

In October, an unemployed and homeless Anthony Palladino arrived in Utica, N.Y., a city of 60,000 people about halfway between Albany and Syracuse. Palladino had been laid off from a job at an electronics manufacturer in Onenota, 60 miles down the road. It was a job he'd held for 13 years. When he walked into the local social services department, he was told he'd have to be placed on a 45-day waiting list before he could receive any housing assistance. Palladino spent the next several nights at a homeless shelter, struggling to decide if he should focus first on finding a job or a place to live.

The folks at the Oneida County Department of Social Services didn't know it at the time, but the 50-year-old Palladino was a veteran. He served in the Navy as a seaman apprentice from 1980 to 1982, playing war games aboard aircraft carriers in the Pacific and Indian oceans, and keeping watch on the Soviets in the midst of the Cold War. He came home at a time when America was still grappling with the political and psychological quagmire of the Vietnam War, an era in which many communities didn't seem to put much value in taking care of their veterans. But his military career taught Palladino self-reliance, he says. For most of his life, he never struggled for work or money—until the Great Recession forced his company to lay off many of its workers.

Palladino needed help. But like many of his fellow soldiers who have come home from Vietnam, Iraq, Afghanistan and other corners of the world, he wasn't sure where to look for it. He also wasn't sure he wanted to ask for it. He was caught in a common dilemma for veterans: His pride made it hard for him to ask for a helping hand; at the same time, he felt he'd earned it. "I've done my time," Palladino says. "I served my country. I don't want to feel like I'm reaching into someone else's pockets to get benefits that, as a veteran, I should be entitled to."

Little did he know when he arrived in Utica last fall that there was a place in town that could help him—a place that understood men and women like Palladino. The Central New York Veterans Outreach Center, founded in 2009 by another veteran, exclusively serves the area's military men, women and families. Housed in an 87,000-square-foot former YMCA, the center feeds hungry vets and helps connect them with state and federal benefits, as well as guiding them toward work and housing. The center tries to help them cope with the mental health problems that come with military service: In 2011, the center ran a therapeutic photography class that asked vets to document their life through the camera lens. Those photos now hang in the computer lab. Plans are also under way to turn part of the second floor into transitional apartments.

All this is made possible by a three-year, $2 million federal grant from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs' Veterans Homelessness Prevention Demonstration Program. Awarded in 2010, the grant pays for up to 18 months of rent assistance, utility payments and even car repairs up to $1,000. So far, the center has helped nearly 500 veterans and their families avoid homelessness—including Anthony Palladino.

Palladino heard about the outreach center through the grapevine of the former military community—which is substantial in New York state, where as many as 20,000 veterans are estimated to be homeless. After a few weeks in Utica, he went to the center and told the staff he'd found a cheap apartment advertised in the newspaper. Thanks to the federal grant, he moved into the one-bedroom apartment in November. The center is paying his $250 monthly rent, allowing Palladino to turn his attention to finding a job. He has had some encouraging prospects, including an interview with the Turning Stone Casino in nearby Verona. He credits the outreach center and its coalition of community and government resources with helping him land on his feet.

Palladino picks up lunch from the local shelter...

As Palladino's experience suggests, American communities are starting to realize the importance of supporting returning veterans. Though the overall veteran population is expected to decline in coming years, approaching 15 million in 2035, down from an estimated 23 million now, their needs are still great. About 131,000 veterans are homeless on any given night, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and veterans are more likely to report mental health problems, chronic medical conditions and work limitations than their non-veteran peers. So while the need for strong community support is more apparent

to the public today than in the recent past, the problem is that nobody is exactly sure how to provide it.

Helping veterans when they return from duty has historically been seen as the role of the federal government. Even state veterans affairs departments largely devote their time and energy to helping vets secure federal benefits. Dwindling local government resources have made it hard for cities and counties to jumpstart any serious effort to improve services for their military men and women. But a successful model is emerging—and the Central New York Veterans Outreach Center in Utica has become one example of it.

Local governments might not have the necessary resources to address veterans' needs in all their facets, but they can be a key partner and supporter of the community groups that do. Sometimes, it's as simple as screening people who come into the social services or mental health departments, asking if they've served in the military and directing them to community groups that serve vets. In places like Utica, state and local officials regularly visit the centers to check in with the veterans and make sure they're taking advantage of government benefits. Ultimately, what emerges is an ongoing relationship between the volunteers in the community and the folks in City Hall.

That's what makes the model work, and it's that kind of mutual determination that will be needed to make communities across the country more hospitable to their veterans, says Steve Darman, a Vietnam-era veteran and consultant to the Utica outreach center. "We had a long period of doing what we could to avoid veterans," he says. "We didn't want to talk to them. We didn't want to know what was going on with them. There was no history of communities thinking about what we can do as a community to help veterans. But something we're starting to understand is it takes a community for a veteran to come home. The light bulb has gone on."

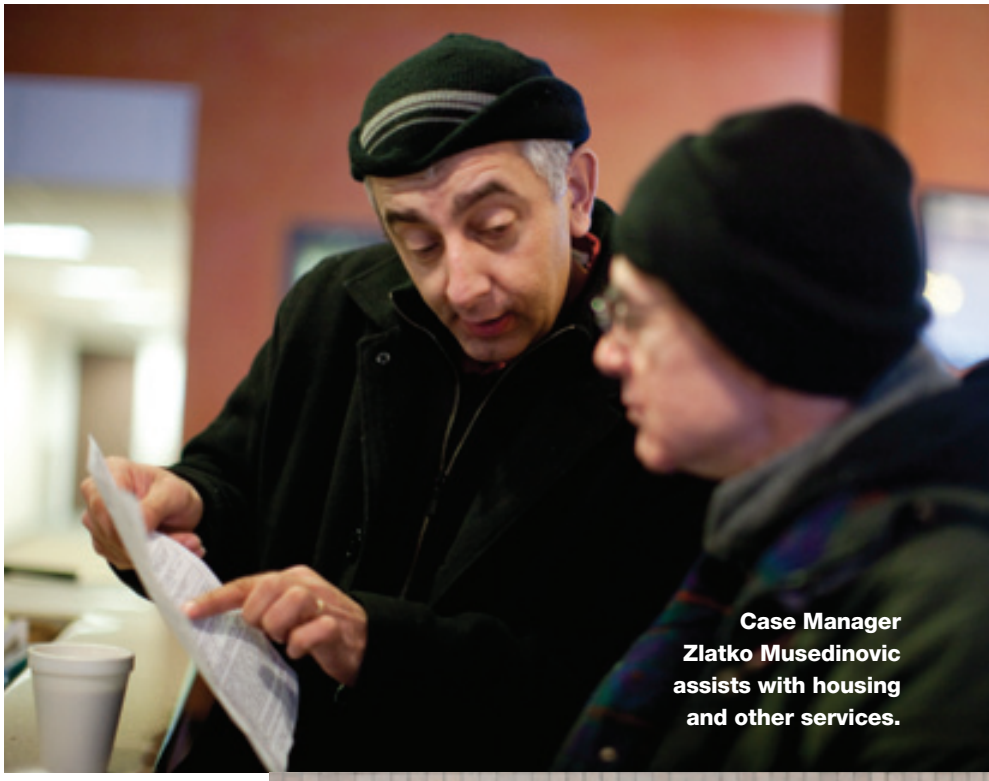
The Utica center didn't start from scratch, though. It learned a lot from the Veterans Outreach Center 140 miles to the west in Rochester. The Rochester center was founded in 1973 by a collection of Vietnam veterans who wanted to help their own. It's since become the standard bearer for the one-stop, holistic-style shop that its younger counterpart in Utica seeks to emulate—and, in effect, has helped turn this patch of upstate and western New York into fertile testing ground for providing better community service for veterans. Syracuse University, for example, opened the Institute for Veterans and Military Families in 2011, a first-of-its-kind program dedicated to interdisciplinary scholarship around veterans' issues. And in Buffalo, a group of nonprofits is in the process of securing real estate to relaunch the Western New York Veterans One-Stop Center, which will borrow much of its operating model from the Rochester program.

Jim McDonough, president of the Veterans Outreach Center from 2010 to 2011 and senior fellow for veterans affairs at the New York State Health Foundation, says the older program views its younger spin-offs in a "big brother, little brother" frame. That

...before returning to the Central New York Veterans Outreach Center.

mentorship took an official form in May when, with a grant from the State Health Foundation, the Rochester center drafted an official blueprint for how community organizations could better coordinate with their government counterparts and the community at large to aid veterans. It's a step-by-step guide to creating a one-stop shop anywhere in the United States, drawing from the 40 years of experience that the Rochester program possesses.

That experience and the center's entrenchment in the community have enabled it to expand beyond its one-stop shop concept. Perhaps the most interesting project is a discount card for veterans, a joint undertaking by Monroe County and the center. Through the card, veterans receive deals, like a 10 percent discount on all purchases, at more than 100 participating local businesses. "It's a pretty cool relationship that has developed," says Laura Stradley, director of the Monroe County Veterans Services Agency. "We've been able to develop a much stronger connection with our veteran population."



Case Manager Zlatko Musedinovic assists with housing and other services.

Project Director Terésa Fava-Schram hopes to see the Utica center expand to use more of the space in its building, formerly a YMCA.

It's this kind of government and community partnership that makes the Rochester model work, says McDonough, a retired U.S. Army colonel. But it's a relationship built out of necessity as much as anything else because local governments don't have many resources to spare. Monroe County's veterans office employs just six full-time staff members to serve a veteran population that approaches 70,000 in the greater Rochester area. In Oneida County, home to Utica and its 20,000 veterans, the county agency has three staffers, making it the smallest department in the county, "which is crazy when you look at our population and the veteran population we're serving," says Oneida County Executive Anthony Picente. "But it's impossible to do anything more in these financial times."

"You see that a marriage between government and private resources offers you the greatest amount of promise to do the greatest amount of good," says McDonough. "You find these little pockets that have sprung up in response to the shame of the post-Vietnam era and with a renewed sense of purpose to serve those serving our country. But the country needs a strategy. It can no longer singularly rely on and delegate to the federal government to do this."

If nothing else, the federal government is contributing a fair amount of money to these local efforts. The $2 million federal grant keeps the Utica center afloat for now; the overall federal program put $15 million over three years toward five projects nationwide. About $1 million in federal funding accounts for nearly half of the Rochester center's annual budget. The federal Supportive Services for Veteran Families (SSVF) program, which

aims to prevent veteran homelessness and which the Rochester program participates in, received $300 million in this year's budget, one of the largest investments in improving veterans' welfare since the post-World War II G.I. Bill.

But advocates on the ground worry that federal efforts are too scattershot, hardly the comprehensive strategy that McDonough would like to see. At the end of this year, for instance, the Utica center's prevention grant from the Veterans Homelessness Prevention Demonstration Program will run out, despite its demonstrated success. Project Director Terésa Fava-Schram says she's proud of the work that the Utica center has done with the federal money, but she never received an explanation for why the program wasn't taken to scale, as the "demonstration" moniker would imply. Instead, her staff, with the help of the Rochester center, will try to obtain a SSVF grant to replace the lost funding. In the meantime, they've been scrapping donated walkers for metal and renting out the former YMCA gym to youth soccer clubs to try to make ends meet.

Palladino uses the center's computers to search for job opportunities and to check his email.

That's one example of what advocates and officials say is a lack of long-term planning from Washington, D.C. A statistic commonly cited by advocates is that the VA is only directly serving roughly 30 to 35 percent of the 23 million veterans in the United States at any given time—numbers backed up by surveys conducted by the VA. (Multiple requests for comment from the VA were not returned.) "What we're doing locally is damage control," says Monroe County's Stradley. "We probably wouldn't need half of these community resources if the VA were more efficient."

Without a national strategy in place to improve veterans services, the onus falls on states and localities to be innovative. Fortunately, a consensus on best practices is starting to form. The primary lesson: Establish local veterans services agencies. New York required its counties to create veterans departments in the aftermath of World War II, and their role, despite small staffs, has been crucial to the success of the efforts in Rochester and Utica. The state has also had a property tax exemption for veterans in place for decades.

Other states are starting to explore what they can do to help veterans transition home. In Virginia, which has seen the largest population increase in young veterans in the country, Gov. Bob McDonnell has pledged to make his state the most veteran-friendly in the union. "We want vets to come here," says Terrie Suit, Virginia's secretary of veterans affairs and homeland security. "We want to attract them. We believe vets are extremely capable and fantastic contributors to the community."

To that end, the state has undertaken a wide range of initiatives, including granting in-state tuition to all veterans regardless of actual residency; establishing a one-stop center similar to the Rochester and Utica model at Fort Monroe; and working with groups like the American Legion and other veteran services organizations to give them a permanent voice in the state legislature.

One of the most important efforts is rethinking the state's occupational licensing requirements so that they recognize military service. Virginia sent officials to Fort Lee, just south of Richmond, to observe service members driving military trucks, which then led to that training being counted toward a veteran's application for a commercial trucking license. "It's ridiculous that people who drove over land mines overseas wouldn't be able to come home and get a driver's license," Jane Oates, assistant secretary for employment and training administration at the U.S. Department of Labor, said at a U.S. Conference of Mayors meeting in January.

More than 20 other states have adopted some kind of policy to make it easier for vets to count military experience when applying for private-sector jobs, according to the National Conference of State Legislatures, including Virginia and New York. In New York, the state legislature passed a bill that would expedite the process for military doctors to be certified as emergency medical technicians.

Slowly but surely, changes are coming, much to the relief of veterans like McDonough and Darman. But galvanizing real political will to craft a comprehensive national strategy remains a difficult goal. Politicians are quick to pay lip service to veterans on the stump, but turning that rhetoric into actual policymaking hasn't been easy.

"There's still no big national idea," says Darman. "But you get the sense that we don't want to make the same mistakes again. We're not going to screw this up again. This touches everybody. If you don't do a good job, you're either missing an asset or you're creating a liability." **G**

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