

AMWA “Steps Up” in Support of A Safe Haven’s Inaugural Veteran STAND DOWN Event

By
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There was a lot of excitement in the preparation for the STAND DOWN event in Chicago on Sunday, July 13, 2014. This inaugural event sponsored by A Safe Haven Foundation was a day focused on helping homeless veterans and to serve as a fundraiser



A participant sitting in front of Douglas Park Field House

to help ease some of the burdens of homelessness. A Safe Haven Foundation is an organization devoted to assisting people who are homeless to be rehabilitated and to find resources in order to regain their independence. In honor of the organization’s 20th anniversary of service and this event, the City of Chicago and State of Illinois proclaimed July 13th to be “A Safe Haven Day.” The event was held at the Field House located in Douglas Park directly following

the nation’s largest 5K Run To End Homelessness. Many Illinois officials were in attendance along with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, which provided music for the event. It was estimated that about 300 homeless veterans were present. The goods and services that were provided included but were not limited to: health screenings, legal and social services, assistance with IDs and state registrations, educational and employment resources, barber services, numerous personal products and supplies as well as lunch. There was an abundant amount of resources and supplies donated to the veterans and their families on this day.



Homeless veterans conversing during STAND DOWN event in Douglas Park Field House

A significant number of volunteers gave of their time at the event and came from many different areas of Chicago as well as from outside of the city. Among the



The medical MASH team with Diversity and Inclusion Section co-chairs Drs. Neelum Aggarwal (center of photo) and Vanessa al Rashida (top right)

volunteers were AMWA Diversity and Inclusion Section co-chairs Dr. Neelum Aggarwal and Dr. Vanessa al Rashida, who assisted with the health screenings. This event should also be noted as a landmark for being the AMWA Diversity and Inclusion Section’s first volunteer activity. Dr. Aggarwal spearheaded a team of volunteers which included: physicians, medical students, and undergraduate students primarily from Rush University Medical Center and Jesse Brown VA Medical Center, in addition to Dr. al Rashida and a social worker from St. Louis, Missouri. A large number of veterans were screened for hypertension and diabetes by having their blood pressure and blood glucose checked. HIV screenings were also available for the veterans. There was a small number of participants received physical examinations as well.

Of those in attendance, it was noticed that the majority of homeless veterans were males with a small amount being females. One of the speculated reasons for this was because of the treatment they received while in the military service. Because of this, some of the volunteers in Dr. Aggarwal's team made an extra effort to search out female veterans and ask if they would be interested in receiving a health screening. For the representatives of AMWA, it was disheartening to see a small turnout of female veterans. This was also observed by the co-founders of A Safe Haven Foundation, Mrs. Neli Vazquez-Rowland and Mr. Brian Rowland. As a result, hopefully next year, the event will seek out more female veterans to receive resources and care.

As a physician and observer in this event, I found it a little difficult as a civilian to understand why there continued to be a difference of treatment between men and women in the military. From what information I collected, it made me see why there



Neli Vazquez-Rowland (left) and Dr. Neelum Aggarwal (right) in front of the medical MASH area

might have been a low turnout of female veterans at this particular event. The history of the treatment of female military personnel has been discussed for years, but not as much as in the present day. The issues revolving around the reports of sexual harassment and sexual assault within the military is being brought to the political agenda more and more in recent times. It has been estimated that 1 in 5 or about 20% of the females in the military are sexually harassed or assaulted while they are in service to our great country. However, due to the low number of females reporting these incidences, the numbers could be even greater. With the help of senators such as Missouri Senator Claire McCaskill, reforms are underway. Consequences for the military offenders now include them being removed from their authority to overturn the jury rulings of sexual assault cases. In addition, it has now been put into law that it is a crime to retaliate against servicemembers for stepping forth and reporting incidences of sexual assault. Hopefully the changes in the punishment for sexual harassment and sexual assault will help all of our military, particularly the female personnel. This knowledge of the past treatments of female service providers may help shed light on the small number of female veterans at this event. A possible alternative for next year's event could be to have an event over a three-day period, with one of those days being catered to the female veterans and the others for the male veterans. This is one of the many topics that will be discussed in the Diversity and Inclusion Section of AMWA through the Military and Veteran Affairs subcommittee. It is with great hope that AMWA will be able to give further support to this issue.



The medical MASH team with A Safe Haven Foundation co-founder Neli Vazquez-Rowland (center)

In summary, this was Chicago's largest STAND DOWN event, which brought out a large number of homeless veterans to be provided the right resources in order to regain their lives in society. This event has brought about many firsts and hopefully will continue to do so in the future. It is also hoped that there will be more AMWA members to step up and assist in an event such as this one in the future, may it be in Chicago or in their local cities and towns.