

NATIONAL VETERANS EMPLOYMENT & EDUCATION COMMISSION

• VETERAN HOMELESSNESS

Vernon Poling was 44 years old when he finally got a home of his own. The Iraq War veteran was medically discharged from the Army in 2014, had to quit his trucking job for medical reasons and found himself living out of his pickup last year in Orange County, a sprawling area of Southern California known for beaches, Disneyland and high housing costs. Poling was homeless for seven months before he found temporary housing in the area. He then learned about Potter's Lane, an apartment complex made from recycled shipping containers, just for homeless veterans. It's believed to be the first of its kind in the U.S. On a sunny Friday in April, Poling walked into his 480-square-foot apartment for the first time, set down his backpack on his new floor and took it all in. "I have never had a place of my own," Poling said. "I got out of high school, I tried working. I was still living with the parents. I joined the Army at 23, active-duty. Then I was staying with Uncle Sam in the barracks. To finally have my own place, it feels really good." Poling was the last of 15 homeless veterans to move into Potter's Lane, a \$6.7 million project paid for with federal, state and local dollars, donations and money from the nonprofit behind the project, American Family Housing, among other sources. The apartments could easily belong to San Francisco tech workers or hipsters in Los Angeles' trendy Arts District. Each of the 15 units are made of three shipping containers pieced together and spiffed up with faux wood flooring, drywall and floor-to-ceiling windows on two of four walls. They include artwork and homemade quilts, and overlook a courtyard that includes a giant American flag, a garden, grills and picnic tables.

American Family Housing wanted to make sure the complex's design built on the strength of the U.S. military, said Donna Gallup, the group's president. "All of the units look over the courtyard so that they can watch each other's backs and develop that community and that sense of belonging," she said. The men living at Potter's Lane were among 350 homeless veterans in Orange County. The county's homeless population is much smaller than that of neighboring Los Angeles, but it's expanding. Orange County has about 4,800 homeless people overall, a 13 percent increase since 2013, according to Point-in-Time, a group that tracks homelessness. Potter's Lane is a positive step forward, but with just 15 apartments, it's also a "drop in the bucket" for the region's homeless, said Eve Garrow, homelessness policy analyst for the American Civil Liberties Union's Orange County office. "About 54 percent of all people experiencing homelessness in the county are literally living in the streets," Garrow said. "Meanwhile, the wait time for affordable housing is between five and 10 years when you can get on the list. So there's a dire shortage." Garrow also has concerns about the location of Potter's Lane in a commercial area among car repair shops. "We need to be thinking about models that integrate people who were previously homeless, so they can enjoy and access all the benefits the community offers," Garrow said. Gallup of American Family Housing said the location helped speed the permitting process. "In just about six months' time we had an entire 15-unit project completed," Gallup said. "Normally, a traditional project would take up to two years to build, and the fact that our homeless veterans are sleeping on the streets right now, I think timing is very important." Megan Hustings, director of the Washington, D.C.-based National Coalition for the Homeless, said she's never heard of using shipping containers for permanent housing for the homeless, though there have been affordable housing projects involving tiny houses in places

like Denver, Seattle and Austin. A lack of affordable housing nationwide means more projects like Potter's Lane are needed, Hustings said. After two months of living in his new home, Poling said he was feeling settled and had made friends, particularly with his next-door neighbor Dale Dollar, a former Marine who was homeless for 14 years. On a recent evening, Poling and Dollar sidled up to a picnic table with plates of pasta and salad, part of a weekly meal provided to Potter's Lane residents by a local nonprofit. They laughed and bobbed their heads to upbeat oldies playing on speakers as they chowed down. Though he appreciates the company, Poling said the best part of his new home is probably his bed. "There's been a couple nights that I've been surprised I've slept so long," Poling said. "It's a load off."

CAREER FAIRS

This week, work continued on The American Legion's upcoming hiring events to be staged in Arlington (TX), Atlanta, Belle Chasse (LA), Biloxi (MS), Camp Pendleton, Carlisle (PA), Fort Carson, Fort Hood, Fort Jackson (SC), Fort Sam Houston, Honolulu, Joint Base Lewis-McChord, King George (VA), Lexington Park (MD), McLean (VA), Philadelphia, Rochester (MI), San Antonio, San Francisco and Washington, DC. The mission of The American Legion's National Veterans Employment & Education Commission is to take actions that affect the economic wellbeing of veterans, including issues relating to veterans' education, employment, home loans, vocational rehabilitation, homelessness and small business.

Joseph C. Sharpe, Jr., Director
Veterans Employment & Education Division
202.861.2700 ext. 2989
Week Ending: 9/1/17