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Homeless Veterans Sue Over Neglected Campus

By ADAM NAGOURNEY

LOS ANGELES — It is a 387-acre campus of green fields and low-lying buildings in a prosperous neighborhood, donated to the federal government more than 100 years ago for use as a Pacific Coast home for wounded veterans. But over the last 20 years, as Los Angeles has become inundated with homeless veterans, advocates for the homeless say the campus has become a symbol of a system gone wrong: as veterans sleep on the streets, many of its buildings lie abandoned and one-third of the land has been leased for commercial use.

On Wednesday, advocates for the homeless sued the [Department of Veterans Affairs](#), seeking to compel federal officials to use the campus to care for and house mentally ill veterans.

In the class-action suit, filed on behalf of four mentally distressed homeless veterans, lawyers contend that the department has violated the terms of the agreement in which the property was deeded to the government in 1888. They also contend that the department is required — under a federal statute barring discrimination against the mentally disabled — to provide housing to help mentally ill veterans.

The scope of the lawsuit is, to a certain extent, limited: if successful, it would apply only to those

homeless veterans deemed mentally disabled. Yet Los Angeles has the largest population of homeless veterans in the nation — 8,200 of the city’s estimated 49,000 homeless people, by one count — and the number is expected to swell as soldiers return from Afghanistan and Iraq.

By any measure, the lawsuit — the first of its kind, lawyers said — is a significant escalation in a battle that has simmered here for years, as homeless advocates contended that the Department of Veterans Affairs was bowing to residents of the property’s prosperous Brentwood neighborhood and commercial interests by refusing to rehabilitate abandoned buildings and use them to help veterans.

For the first 100 years of its existence, the campus was used entirely to provide housing and services to veterans; that began changing in the 1960s and ’70s, as some of the buildings were abandoned and the Department of Veterans Affairs leased about one-third of the property for use by, among others, a car rental agency, a laundry for the Marriott hotel chain, a golf course, a dog walk and a baseball stadium for the nearby University of California, Los Angeles. It now has a limited number of geriatric beds for veterans.

“It is a piece of land that has accommodated the interests of powerful people in L.A. for a long time,” said Bobby Shriver, a member of the Santa Monica City Council and one of the people pushing the suit. “Now, we are going to make it accommodate the interests of these veterans.”

Josh Taylor, a Veterans Affairs spokesman, declined to comment on the suit, referring questions to the Department of Justice. But in a statement, Mr. Taylor reiterated a pledge from Eric K. Shinseki, the Veterans Affairs secretary, “to end veteran homelessness by 2015.

“We have a moral obligation to ensure that veterans and their families have access to affordable housing and medical services that will get them back on their feet,” Mr. Taylor said. “Though much work remains, V.A. is beginning to make good on that promise.”

Two years ago, Mr. Taylor added, there were approximately 131,000 homeless veterans on any given night across the country. “Today, we estimate there are about 76,000 homeless veterans,” he said.

The suit was filed in the United States District Court for the Central District of California. The plaintiffs include veterans from Iraq, Afghanistan and Vietnam. The suit asks the court to prohibit the federal government from using the land and buildings for any purpose but to help veterans.

“Los Angeles is the homeless veterans’ capital of the United States,” Mark Rosenbaum, one of the lawyers in the case, said Wednesday morning, adding, “The V.A. could quite literally end veteran homelessness in Los Angeles if this land were used as it was intended.”

“This spacious campus now housing empty buildings and rental car parking lots could be made suitable for these veterans in less than the five or so months it took to plan and invade Iraq,” he said.

Steve Mackey, the president of the California state council of Vietnam Veterans of America, said the lawsuits were “a last resort.”

“We have spent years working to persuade the federal government, and the V.A. in particular, to provide the services and accommodations,” he said.

The lawsuit is the first to try to apply a 1973 law prohibiting discrimination by federal agencies on the basis of disability to the question of whether the government must provide housing to homeless veterans.



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