

Lawsuit declares LA 'homeless veterans capital' of the country, says West LA VA complex being misused

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LOS ANGELES - In a major lawsuit aimed at providing housing for homeless veterans in Southern California, the American Civil Liberties Union and veterans groups have sued the federal government for alleged misuse of the Veterans Administration complex in West Los Angeles.

The sprawling West L.A. VA campus covers nearly 400 acres near Wilshire Boulevard and the 405 Freeway. It is home to a regional VA medical center.

But American Civil Liberties Union attorney Mark Rosenbaum said it provides virtually no housing for homeless veterans. He told reporters gathered outside the gates that it provides commercial leases on more than a quarter of the land.

"This campus today is home not to disabled veterans, but to Enterprise Rent-A-Car, a Marriott linen laundry facility, a Brentwood private school's athletic facilities, and even a dog run," Rosenbaum said.

He called the arrangement "scandalous." The ACLU's lawsuit seeks to force the facility to offer permanent supportive housing for more than 8,000 homeless vets in the L.A. area, many of whom suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder.



Veterans for years have protested outside the gates of the Veterans Administration campus in West Los Angeles. A newly filed ACLU lawsuit accuses the VA of failing to provide adequate services to homeless veterans.

The suit names the local Veterans Affairs director and federal Veterans Affairs Secretary Eric Shinseki. "General Shinseki specifically said permanent supportive housing is the answer. So they have talked the talk, but they have not acted on this rhetoric," Rosenbaum said.

The story of the lead plaintiff in the case is one that has been repeated across the country, and is heartbreaking, said attorneys working on the case.

Greg Valentini, 33, was born in Hawaiian Gardens and grew up in Long Beach and Lakewood. He's a decorated combat veteran who served multiple tours in Afghanistan and Iraq with the U.S. Army's 101st Airborne unit. Seven years ago, he returned home and entered Long Beach City College.

"Immediately he noticed he had trouble relating to his classmates, he had trouble controlling his emotions," **Inner City Law Center attorney Melissa Tyner** said. "He felt on alert as if he was

expecting an ambush at any moment. He repeatedly would get up to check locked doors, stare compulsively at passing cars to see if there was anything suspicious."

Valentini was suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder. "Eventually he started using drugs to cope with the incredible overwhelming stress," Tyner said. "He ended up homeless and sleeping in a tent behind Long Beach city airport."

The lawsuit says that veterans like Valentini need permanent housing with supports like extensive psychiatric help, job training and other services – and that the VA is legally required to provide it at its West L.A. campus with its dozens of unused buildings.

Steve Mackey of Vietnam Veterans of America said Valentini was too afraid to attend a news conference because he didn't know how he would react to all the cameras and questions. Mackey read a statement from Valentini that said he's considered suicide. "I felt coming home in a flag-draped coffin would have been better than coming home alive to a community that did not understand what I was going through."

VA officials refused to be interviewed for this story.

In written response to the lawsuit, the Veterans Administration said it offers nearly a thousand beds for homeless veterans in the region, and provides extensive services at its West L.A. facility. It noted that VA Secretary Shinseki has committed to end homelessness among veterans by 2015, and said its count indicates their numbers are declining.

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Homeless Veterans Lawsuit

Carolina Winston Barrie remains unconvinced. Barrie is the grand-niece of the woman who, more than a century ago, donated the land for the West L.A. VA campus. She said he included no fewer than five references in the deed that the owners use the land as a home for veterans – long before the term “permanent supportive housing” came into fashion for homeless veterans.



Carolina Winston Barrie (right) is the grand-niece of the man who donated the land on which the West L.A. Veterans Administration campus sits. He said in the deed that the land was to be used as a home for veterans. Barrie is pictured with her daughter.

“At that time, the concept of home was meant to be a domestic environment that sought to provide a home for life by catering to the whole person – intellectual, emotional, spiritual and physical,” Barrie said.

Barrie, 83, said the West L.A. campus once housed many veterans. As that ended in the 1970s, her family raised concerns; since then, it’s sent dozens of letters to complain.

“We will continue to fight for the intent of our ancestors,” she said. “We have joined the ACLU in this suit. It is well past the time that all of this donated land be returned to the home for which it was intended.”

Harvard Law School professor Lawrence Tribe and Southern California attorney Ron Olson, a member of KPCC’s board, are co-counsel in the ACLU’s federal lawsuit.