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Housing for the Wounded

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The federal government should not have to be sued into giving veterans with mental illnesses and brain injuries the care they need so they don't end up living in the street. But it has come to that.

A lawsuit filed on Wednesday in Federal District Court in California seeks to force the Veterans Affairs Department to carry out a long-stalled plan to build permanent housing for disabled veterans on property it owns in Los Angeles, which is thought to have the nation's largest concentration of homeless veterans.

The class-action suit, brought by the American Civil Liberties Union of Southern California on behalf of disabled homeless veterans, makes a powerful claim of discrimination and dereliction of responsibility by the government.

It notes that the land, nearly 400 acres in a prime section of West Los Angeles, was deeded to the federal government in 1888 expressly for use as a home for disabled soldiers and sailors. Yet

no such housing exists there now, though a large veterans hospital with short-term treatment beds occupies part of that land. A wide array of other features, like athletic fields, theater stages, hotel laundries, rental-car and bus storage, even oil wells and a dog park, has also been built on the sprawling campus — but no home for veterans with mental health problems.

The plaintiffs argue that the lack of housing discriminates against these veterans. The government is legally obliged to give them the same access to care as other sick veterans, the plaintiffs say, but effective care is impossible when the veterans have no homes.

Their argument is based on a well-established view among medical and social-service providers that the only sure way to give these vulnerable patients effective, consistent access to care is to house them first. Only later, with stability in their turbulent lives, can they benefit from mental health and addiction treatment, and job training and education to help them regain their independence.

No politician has ever failed to profess his or her allegiance to wounded warriors, and that includes President Obama; the veterans affairs secretary, Eric Shinseki; and California politicians like Senator Dianne Feinstein and Representative Henry Waxman. But there is a yawning gap between their earnest pledges and their continuing failure to provide a roof and beds for homeless veterans. This housing plan, long a cause of Bobby Shriver, a City Council member and former mayor of Santa Monica, would respond to a great need with an obvious solution.

The Los Angeles area has more than 8,000 homeless veterans, about 8 percent of the 107,000 or so across the country. It also has a huge government-owned property waiting to be built upon. It's simple, really.