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*Citizen Comment*

# Threat of homelessness grows among vets

■ A new generation of homeless veterans emerges in the wake of Iraq and Afghanistan.

The Associated Press

LEEDS, Mass. — Peter Mohan traces the path from the Iraqi battlefield to this lifeless conference room, where he sits in a kilt and a Camp Kill Yourself T-shirt and calmly describes how he became a sad cliché: a homeless veteran.

There was a happy homecoming, but then an accident — car crash, broken collarbone. And then a move East, close to his wife's new job but away from his best friends.

And then self-destruction: He would gun his motorcycle to 100 mph and try to stand on the seat. He would wait for his wife to leave in the morning, draw the blinds and open up whatever bottle of booze was closest.

He would pull out his gun, a .45-caliber, semiautomatic pistol. He would lovingly clean it, or just look at it and put it away. Sometimes place it in his mouth.

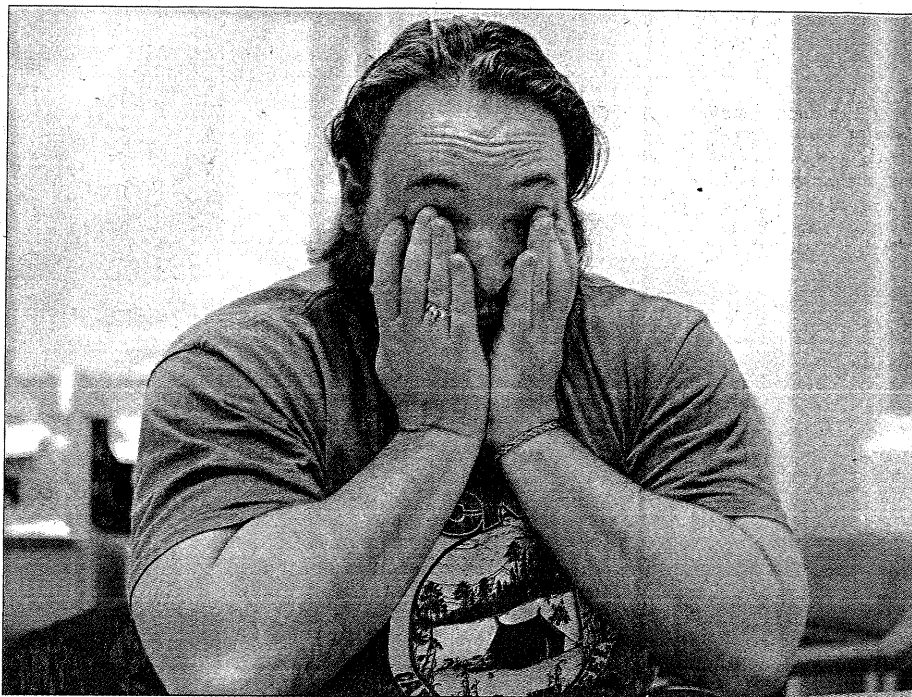
"I don't know what to do anymore," his wife, Anna, told him one day. "You can't be here anymore."

Peter Mohan never did find a steady job after he left Iraq. He lost his wife — a judge granted their divorce this fall — and he lost his friends and he lost his home, and now he is here, in a shelter.

He is 28 years old. "People come back from war different," he offers by way of a summary.

This is not a new story in America: A young veteran back from war whose struggle to rejoin society has failed, at least for the moment, fighting demons and left homeless.

But it is happening to a new generation. As the war in Afghanistan plods on in its seventh year, and the war in Iraq in its fifth, a new cadre of homeless veterans is taking shape. And with it come the questions: How is it that a



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Peter Mohan, a veteran of the Afghan and Iraq wars, cries while speaking about a friend killed in combat in Iraq during an interview at a veterans homeless shelter in Leeds, Mass., on Dec. 4.

nation that became so familiar with the archetypal homeless, combat-addled Vietnam veteran is now watching as more homeless veterans turn up from new wars?

What lessons have we not learned? Who is failing these people? Or is homelessness an unavoidable byproduct of war, of young men and women who devote themselves to serving their country and then see things no man or woman should?

## Casualties of war

For as long as the United States has sent its young men — and later its young women — off to war, it has watched as a segment of them come home and lose the battle with their own memories, their own scars, and wind up without homes.

The Civil War produced thousands of wandering veterans. Frequently addicted to

morphine, they were known as "tramps," searching for jobs and, in many cases, literally still tending their wounds.

More than a decade after the end of World War I, the "Bonus Army" descended on Washington — demanding immediate payment on benefits that had been promised to them, but payable years later — and were routed by the U.S. military.

And, most publicly and perhaps most painfully, there was Vietnam: Tens of thousands of war-weary veterans, infamously rejected or forgotten by many of their fellow citizens.

Now it is happening again, in small but growing numbers.

For now, about 1,500 veterans from Iraq and Afghanistan have been identified by the Department of Veterans Affairs. About 400 of them have taken part in VA programs designed to target homelessness.

The 1,500 are a small, young segment of an estimated 336,000 veterans in the United States who were homeless at some point in 2006, the most recent year for which statistics are available, according to the National Alliance to End Homelessness. Still, advocates for homeless veterans use words like "surge" and "onslaught" and even "tsunami" to describe what could happen in the coming years, as both wars continue and thousands of veterans struggle with post-traumatic stress.

People who have studied postwar trauma say there is always a lengthy gap between coming home — the time of parades and backslaps and "The Boys Are Back in Town" on the local FM station — and the moments of utter darkness that leave some of them homeless.

In that time, usually a period

of years, some veterans focus on the horrors they saw on the battlefield, or the friends they lost, or why on earth they themselves deserved to come home at all. They self-medicate, develop addictions, spiral down.

How — or perhaps the better question is why — is this happening again?

"I really wish I could answer that question," says Anthony Belcher, an outreach supervisor at New Directions, which conducts monthly sweeps of Skid Row in Los Angeles, identifying homeless veterans and trying to help them get over addictions.

"It's the same question I've been asking myself and everyone around me. I'm like, wait, wait, hold it, we did this before. I don't know how our society can allow this to happen again."

## Iraq trials

Mental illness, financial troubles and difficulty in finding affordable housing are generally accepted as the three primary causes of homelessness among veterans, and in the case of Iraq and Afghanistan, the first has raised particular concern.

Iraq veterans are less likely to have substance abuse problems but more likely to suffer mental illness, particularly post-traumatic stress, according to the Veterans Administration. And that stress by itself can trigger substance abuse.

Some advocates say there are also some factors particular to the Iraq war, like multiple deployments and the proliferation of improvised explosive devices, that could be pulling an early trigger on stress disorders that can lead to homelessness.

While many Vietnam veterans began showing manifestations of stress disorders roughly 10 years after returning from the front, Iraq and Afghanistan veterans have shown the signs much earlier. That could also be because stress disorders are much better understood now than they were a generation ago, advocates say.