

A Pastoral Statement on Veterans

November 11, 2009



The Washington State Catholic Conference (WSCC) represents the Catholic bishops of Washington State: Archbishop Alex J. Brunett of the Archdiocese of Seattle, Bishop William S. Skylstad of the Diocese of Spokane, Bishop Carlos A. Sevilla S.J., of the Diocese of Yakima, Bishop Eusebio Elizondo M.Sp.S., Auxiliary Bishop of the Archdiocese of Seattle and Bishop Joseph J. Tyson, Auxiliary Bishop of the Archdiocese of Seattle.

“We are one human family; whatever our national, racial, ethnic, economic, and ideological differences. We are our brothers’ and sisters’ keepers, wherever they may be.”... “A basic moral test for our society is how we treat the most vulnerable in our midst.”

Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship,
USCCB, 2007

This Veterans Day, we the bishops of Washington State are distressed to see more homeless people on our streets, realizing that as many as 25 percent of them are veterans. As pastors, we want to take the opportunity on this annual holiday to reflect on the sacrifices of those who have served in the armed forces, and express gratitude for their service. No matter how you feel about war, we as Catholics, are called to offer assistance to veterans and their families in their time of need. We pray for our veterans, the men and women currently serving our country, and all of their families. We thank them for their selfless service, and commit ourselves to ensuring that they and their families receive compassionate care and support. We also ask all peoples to pray for peace in our world.

Veterans and Their Families in Washington State

In our state we acknowledge the many veterans and their families who are members of our parishes and actively participate in parish life. We also welcome active military personnel and their families who bring their energy and life to our parishes. Our state is home to eight major military bases and veterans facilities, and is one of only six states with a growing veteran population. According to the Washington State Department of Veterans Affairs, in our state there are 670,000 veterans, 60,000 active duty troops, 28,000 National Guard and Reserve, and more than 1,000,000 family members. Fort Lewis is the largest military base in the western United States.

New Wounds of War – Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and Brain Injuries

We are saddened to hear of men and women who are suffering from the wounds of war. Daily they are served by our parishes and Catholic Charities agencies. According to studies by the Journal of the American Medical Association, one-third of the men and women returning from Iraq are at-risk for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs reports that over 35 percent of Operation Iraqi Freedom/ Operation Enduring Freedom veterans who have sought Veterans Affairs healthcare have been diagnosed with mental health disorders. For every combat fatality, 16 soldiers return from service suffering from long-term disabling injuries. Brain injuries associated with exposure to high explosive blast or penetrating wounds affect almost 20 percent of combat troops. These injuries appear to increase the risk for substance abuse, homelessness and contact with the justice system.

In 2008, the Washington Department of Veterans Affairs estimated that there were over 8,000 homeless Veterans in Washington State.

The average homeless veteran is characterized as single, male, age 56, unemployed, honorably discharged, a high school graduate, has no family support, and needs medical and dental care.

Homeless veterans in Washington have the highest incidence of hospitalizations for mental health reasons in the nation.

More women are entering military service and by 2010 they will make up 10 percent of the total veteran population. The Department of Defense reports that of the women in service, 60 percent have experienced sexual trauma and 23 percent have experienced sexual assault by military personnel. This leads to a high number of women experiencing stress-related mental health issues, often compensated by alcohol and drug use.

The Catholic Response to Veterans and Their Families

Though veterans never forget their war experience, most make the transition to civilian life and actively contribute to society. Catholic Chaplains, who minister to active duty military men and women and their families, often refer them to services that will help them successfully reintegrate into civilian life after their discharge. Our parishes and schools are often the first place where veterans and their families can be made to feel welcome and supported. Schools are a natural environment for children and families to meet others and create long-lasting relationships. It is in the parish through prayer, the sacraments of healing, and most especially in the Eucharist where the greatest peace of mind can be found.

Regretfully, there are also men and women who suffer the effects of war for years. In each of our Arch/dioceses we are becoming more aware of the needs of veterans, and have established some specific programming to serve them.

May all nations soon “beat their swords into plowshares.”

Isaiah 2:4

The **Archdiocese of Seattle** has found that veterans comprise more than 20 percent of residents in shelters, transitional housing and permanent housing administered by the Catholic Housing Services of Western Washington. Catholic Community Services also provides veterans many long-term care services in their homes, while others are assisted through the Volunteer Chore Services program and the African American Elders Program. CCS has identified veterans and their families as “communities of concern,” and as such, has made them a priority population for services. This newly formed Veterans Initiative works in collaboration with federal, state, and local veterans’ groups to develop opportunities to better serve veterans and their families.

Catholic Charities in the **Diocese of Yakima** works with the state’s Childcare Resource and Referral Program in order to enhance the referral of military families for childcare services. Informational presentations about counseling and other available services are given at the Yakima Training Facility. Though often not self identified as veterans, the Diocesan Housing Authority does welcome veterans to live in a clean and safe environment, and to receive needed counseling and other assistance.

In the **Diocese of Spokane**, Catholic Charities sponsors the House of Charity shelter as a safe haven, offering basic survival needs for veterans. Volunteer Chore Services assists many older veterans enabling them to remain in their homes. A significant number of veterans reside in the diocese’s subsidized housing apartments. Catholic Charities works closely with the local Veterans Affairs, helping veterans understand and access their benefits. With assistance from Catholic Charities, pastors are identifying and addressing the needs of the increasing numbers of veterans suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder after returning home from active duty.

As a faith community we must recognize and honor those men and women who have faithfully served our country. We have committed ourselves to provide care and assistance to veterans who are struggling with the terrible consequences of war. As we commemorate Veterans Day, we ask all Catholics to pray for veterans and their families and for peace among peoples. May all nations soon “beat their swords into plowshares.”
