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FROM Westside Today

Welcoming Home Warriors

Guest Editorial by Toni Reinis, Executive Director New Directions, Inc www.ndvets.org

Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Mike Mullen has crisscrossed this country talking with communities about supporting returning service men and women. He explains that the US military is the best in the world at preparing our young men and women for war and turning them into trained warriors. However, the Department of Defense has done a poor job of transitioning our warriors back to civilian life, and to their families and communities. Communities must join together to welcome our warriors home, and do all that we can to prevent homelessness.

Here on the Westside, there is little to remind our community that the U.S. is at war. But every day at New Directions, we see men and women who suffer from the invisible wounds of war. We are now treating homeless veterans of service in Iraq and Afghanistan – both men and women - who have served as many as four or five tours of duty, far more than ever occurred during Vietnam. The California Department of Veterans Affairs reports that 30,000 military men and women transition out of the military in California every year. But the 20% unemployment among veterans makes that transition harder.

The high rates of trauma, combined with frustration trying to find work and resume civilian life, have landed many young veterans on the streets and can even lead to suicide. Currently the VA reports about 8,000 homeless veterans in Los Angeles, a dramatic decline from five years ago.

Time Magazine reported May 5, 2010 that one in five – 20 percent – of women in the military have suffered sexual trauma, which increases the risk of mental health issues like Post Traumatic Stress Disorder by as much as 60 percent and also increases their risk of homelessness.

More than 40 percent of active-duty women have children, and the divorce rate for female troops is nearly three times the rate of male service members. Women veterans are 2-3 times more likely to commit suicide than non-veteran women. And, the risk for homelessness is 2 to 4 times greater for female veterans than non-veterans.

Homelessness is not acceptable for those who have given so much. Both President Obama and Secretary of Veterans Affairs, General Eric Shinseki, have issued a clear mandate to end homelessness for veterans by 2015 and New Directions is committed to that mandate.

That is why New Directions and the West LA Chamber of Commerce have joined forces and invite the community to Walk for Warriors. This will be a unique opportunity to meet returning veterans as well as active duty military men and women, and to thank them for their service.

Please join us on Memorial Day, May 30th (8:30 am run/9:00 am walk) on the grounds of the West LA VA in front of New Directions building #116. Register by going to: www.walkforwarriors.org or by going to the New Directions website at www.ndvets.org.

- Walk/run in honor of a veteran or active duty military
- Walk/run in memory of a fallen veteran
- Walk/run virtually
- Become a sponsor of the event

Chamber members have shifted into gear by delivering fliers to all local businesses. Churches and synagogues are collecting teams, UCLA and USC School of Military Social Work, businesses, banks and real estate companies will all be gathering. Please join the community and show your support and Walk for Warriors.

Call LaShanda Maze at (310)914-4045 ext 161 for more information.

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