

Contra Costa veterans group partners with local leaders to house vets, help fight blight

By Angela Hart For the Contra Costa Times

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Alan and Jenifer (cq) Johnson, of Antioch, talk with Debra Westlund, of Summit Funding, at a Home Buyer's Faire for Veterans held at the Phillip "Jack" Lee Veterans Memorial Building in Pittsburg, Calif., on Saturday, June 21, 2014. The event, put on by The Delta Veterans Group, has veterans meet with mortgage experts and a real estate experts in an attempt to help them with the home buying process. A similar event will be held next Saturday in Antioch. (Dan Honda/Bay Area News Group)

PITTSBURG -- It was late November 2013, and J.R. Wilson, a disabled veteran who'd spent four years in the military in the 1990s, was in search of a home. Just 24 days later, working with local lenders and real estate agents, he had a house.

"We were in by Christmas," Wilson said recently at the VFW post in Pittsburg. "That's what started it. We realized that we could help solve problems like blight and homelessness by working with city leaders to get our veterans into housing."

Wilson, executive director for a local veterans nonprofit called Delta Veterans Group, on Saturday launched the inaugural "Veterans Home-Buying Triage." The idea is to help veterans with what Wilson calls the four pillars of veterans' success: housing, employment, health and education.



JR Wilson, founder of The Delta Veterans Group, is on hand at a Home Buyer's Faire for Veterans he put together held at the Phillip "Jack" Lee Veterans Memorial Building in Pittsburg, Calif., on Saturday, June 21, 2014. The event, put on by The Delta Veterans Group, has veterans meet with mortgage experts and a real estate experts in an attempt to help them with the home buying process. A similar event will be held next Saturday in Antioch. (Dan Honda/Bay Area News Group)

"We are working with local leaders and the community to bring veterans into our neighborhoods and to fill our vacant houses," Wilson said. "This will not only help fight our blight problems, but it'll help veterans who are transitioning into civilian life and who may be facing homelessness or who could have suicidal thoughts. This program fits into our 'four pillars' approach."

The housing event in Pittsburg enlisted local lenders, real estate agents, veterans groups and city officials to gather local veterans and their families into one space and inform them what they qualify for.

Alan Johnson, who served in the Army from 2001 until 2011, came out to Saturday's event with his wife, Jen. The two, who live in Antioch, sat with a local lender in the largely empty VFW hall.

"We just got married, and we found out we're expecting," Alan Johnson said, as he sat with Debra Westlund, a mortgage consultant with Summit Funding, based in Contra Costa County. Westlund gathered information such as annual income, military experience and housing needs.

"I'm going to do an estimate for you, so you can see what your buying power will be -- exactly how much you qualify for," Westlund said.

Johnson and his wife were one of two couples to attend Saturday's event, but Wilson is organizing future housing events and wants more veterans to attend. His ultimate goal is to fill vacant houses in the area where he grew up, while also helping veterans with housing and other needs.

"We want to get our housing stock renovated and put them on the market, so that this team right here can help put veterans in those homes," Wilson said.

Westlund, who has partnered with Delta Veterans Group and real estate companies such as Prudential, said she wants to give back to those who have served.

"So many vets don't know what's out there; they don't know what they qualify for," she said.



Real Estate and Mortgage experts were on hand to help veterans get into the housing market at a Home Buyer's Faire for Veterans held at the Phillip "Jack" Lee Veterans Memorial Building in Pittsburg, Calif., on Saturday, June 21, 2014. The event, put on by The Delta Veterans Group, has veterans meet with mortgage experts and a real estate experts in an attempt to help them with the home buying process. A similar event will be held next Saturday in Antioch. (Dan Honda/Bay Area News Group)

Wilson, who worked with Westlund to purchase a home in December, said part of what sparked the idea was the vacant property next door to his property in Antioch.

"Growing up here, we never used to see this much vacancy or homelessness," he said. "We really want to get the attention of asset managers and city officials, then work with code enforcement and get those houses on the market."

Wilson is working with county elected officials, lenders and real estate firms to host another veterans housing triage event this Saturday from 1 to 4 p.m. at the American Legion Hall in Antioch.

Antioch Councilman Tony Tiscareno, who is also a real estate agent for Keller Williams in Brentwood, will be at Saturday's event.

"We're working with Delta Veterans Group and other organizations to become more active in the community by participating in neighborhood watch programs and volunteering in community cleanup events," Tiscareno said. "Code enforcement is a big task, but we're trying to encourage the community to take more responsibility. That, along with Measure C, which will provide more police officers and code enforcement, will go far."

Measure C, Antioch's seven-year, half-cent sales tax, raised the city's sales tax rate to 9 percent when it passed in November 2013. Officials said the revenue will go to the city's general fund and can be used for municipal needs such as police, code enforcement or infrastructure repair.

IF YOU GO

What: Veterans Home-Buying Triage for Contra Costa County

When: 1 to 4 p.m. Saturday

Where: American Legion Hall, 403 W. Sixth St., Antioch

Details: 925-421-1384, deltaveteransgroup.org