

Nye Bill Would Help Vets with Rent

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Willard Smith would love for the government to put him out of business.

Rep. Glenn Nye, D-Norfolk, would be happy to oblige.

Smith, better known as "Smitty," runs a transitional housing program in Virginia Beach for homeless veterans who are trying to find a job and get back on their feet. Sadly, his business is booming.

"I am getting calls from people on a daily basis," he said in an interview last week. "It's unfortunate, but I can't help them. I really can't — not with the small amount of beds I have."

Enter Nye, whose 2nd Congressional District lays claim to the second-highest concentration of veterans in the country. He has co-sponsored legislation aimed at reducing the number of calls Smitty has to take.

The bill would provide short-term assistance to veterans who are on the brink of homelessness. They could receive payments for rent or mortgage arrears, security deposits for rental properties, and utility bills or arrears. It would be limited to three months.

The bill includes safeguards to ensure that taxpayers are helping veterans who deserve it, not bailing out deadbeats, Nye said.

"With today's tough economy, some veterans are just a paycheck or two from losing their homes," Nye said. "This bill will help bridge the gap."

The measure would authorize \$100 million each year for fiscal years 2011, 2012 and 2013. The money would be awarded in the form of grants to public organizations and private, nonprofit groups that would make payments on behalf of the veterans.

Before receiving assistance, veterans would have to prove they have a problem making rent or mortgage payments. The legislation also seeks to connect them to services deemed necessary to push them toward a more stable, self-sufficient life, such as job training, mental health treatment or help with drug and alcohol addiction.

The idea has bipartisan support. Nye's co-sponsor is from the other side of the country, not to mention the political spectrum.

Rep. Duncan Hunter — the conservative Republican from California who briefly ran for president in 2008 — has put his name on the bill, known officially as the Nye-Hunter Veterans Homelessness Prevention Act.

"Duncan Hunter and I have been talking about a lot of military and veterans issues," Nye said.

The approach makes sense to Smith, who runs Vetshouse Inc. The nonprofit program has 22 beds — all full — and offers veterans help with job placement, personal skills and counseling. Nye announced his legislation at VetsHouse and spent about 90 minutes talking with some of the residents.

Smith said he likes the idea of preventing homelessness in the first place. Many of his residents have marketable job skills and could fend for themselves if helped at a critical time.

At the moment, Vetshouse is struggling financially. Smith said he asks for donations when he can, but the group needs more money. The other alternative would be ending homelessness once and for all.

"I would enjoy that," he said. "There should not be any homeless veterans on the streets."