In Bright Spot, Homeless Veterans Get a Hand Up

When Hector Reyes moved into his new apartment in December, it marked an end to a string of misfortunes for the disabled veteran, including a period in New York City's homeless shelters.

The 24-year-old's improved circumstances represent a step toward the city's efforts to achieve what it calls "functional zero" homelessness among veterans, which means that the number of homeless veterans entering shelters over 90 days equals the number leaving, according to local homeless advocates and officials.

When the city will arrive at that milestone depends on the amount of housing available and how quickly it can be renovated, according to Steven Banks, commissioner of the Human Resources Administration, who is leading the city's 90-day review of homeless services.

It will also depend on people like Tarika Coli, who works as a housing specialist for Jericho Project, a New York nonprofit organization that serves homeless New Yorkers.

Ms. Coli, 33, and a Navy veteran herself, relies on a network of landlords and brokers who can help her quickly land rentals for the veterans she works with. She scans Craigslist, cold-calls landlords, trades tips with housing specialists at other nonprofits and has been known to drop everything to run to a vacant apartment for an inspection.

There are currently just over 400 veterans living in city-operated shelters, and about 140 more in Department of Veterans Affairs or U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development shelters, Mr. Banks said. He added that there are fewer than 10 veterans who are living on the streets, who haven't accepted offers of permanent housing.

To move those few remaining veterans from the streets into homes is "achieving miracles of individuals," said Mr. Banks, "but that doesn't mean we aren't going to keep working with them to encourage them to take services."

The relative success obtaining housing for veterans has been one of the city's bright spots when it comes to homeless services, attributable to a combination of extensive federal and city housing subsidies, a top-down focus on veterans and expedited efforts to cut through paperwork and other roadblocks.

Private philanthropy and nonprofit organizations serving homeless veterans have also contributed toward the success. The New York-based Robin Hood Foundation, for example, funneled $13 million over several years to start new programs to support veterans.

Urban Pathways, a New York-based organization serving the homeless, has over the past year opened two buildings that give preference to veterans. A third building with 86 units is expected to open next week.

Frederick Shack, chief executive of Urban Pathways, said that part of the success in housing veterans is extensive case management. For example, if a veteran has been dishonorably discharged from military service and is ineligible for certain subsidies, he or she might qualify for low-income housing, he said.

"It's about understanding the barrier and developing a model to overcome it," said Mr. Shack.

At Jericho Project, the intake process involves confirming veteran status and an assessment of the veteran's established benefits and income, among other things. For example, the organization may refer him or her to an attorney in the case of a dishonorable discharge, to see if it can be changed.

From there, housing specialists like Ms. Coli work with the veterans to find a home, starting with a wish-list of locations and budget as well as a frank discussion about what is realistic in terms of apartment size and neighborhood.

She typically takes them to see three homes before asking them to make a decision. Even after securing an apartment, she said, she acts as the veteran's primary reference, offering landlords her personal cellphone in case of any problem at any time.

"We've got to be advocates," said Ms. Coli. "Not everyone sympathizes with veterans as much as we want them to."

It was this kind of advocacy that Mr. Reyes needed to get into his $850-a-month Brooklyn apartment.

Upon discharge—the result of a serious training accident that required multiple surgeries and long-term rehabilitation—Mr. Reyes enrolled at Fordham University to study computer science.

Though government subsidies such as the GI Bill covered his schooling and housing costs, he still had difficulty finding an apartment without a co-signer, he said, because many landlords were wary of his government income.

He got an apartment near the school's Bronx campus but lost it because of a rent dispute with the landlord, Mr. Reyes said. With nowhere to go, he stayed with friends and occasionally landed at a shelter.

Last summer, he was referred to Jericho Project by the VA hospital. Soon after he landed an apartment, he got a job as a security guard. He is focusing on his work and saving money, and he plans to re-enroll in school later this year, he said.

"It feels like my life was put on pause for the last year or so," Mr. Reyes said. "I feel like I am back on track to my goals."