

# Creating a blueprint to help veterans

BY DEAN POLING  
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VALDOSTA — Bob Verhey hopes Valdostans will follow his example of helping veterans, military personnel and their families.

Verhey had a successful career as an innovative businessman in Silicon Valley. He had retired from business to teach classes at Georgia Southern. Though he never served in the Armed Forces, Vice Admiral Norb Ryan asked Verhey to participate in a program to re-integrate veterans and their families into civilian life.

Verhey wasn't certain what he could do. But the offer weighed on him. That night, he realized "maybe veterans need me more than the students."

He became executive director of Veterans' Innovation Center. He took this position without pay. He is a lead motivator in the Community Blueprint project presented to community leaders Tuesday morning in Valdosta.

"I am not a veteran, but I am an American," Verhey told those at the meeting. "... I want Valdosta to step forward and be a Community Blueprint community."

Valdosta is one of a handful of pilot cities participating in the first Community Blueprint initiative. The national Military Officers Association of America asked its 416 chapters to recommend pilot cities. The Valdosta MOAA chapter recommended the South Georgia region.

Led by Ryan, military and civilian Community Blueprint representatives arrived Monday evening in Valdosta.

On Tuesday, these representatives met at the Holiday Inn with various Valdosta organizations who work with active military, veterans and their families. Attending were Valdosta representatives from Moody Air Force Base, the cities of Valdosta and Hahira, local veterans organizations, counseling centers, literacy or-

## QUICK INFO

If you would like to help with the Community Blueprint project, contact Buddy Johnson, (229) 244-2043; or Ron Wilson, (229) 244-1111.

organizations, industry, educational institutions, medical facilities, charitable organizations, legal services, and the Valdosta-Lowndes County Chamber of Commerce. Ron Wilson, chairman of the chamber's military affairs committee and general manager of the Holiday Inn, invited approximately 60 people to attend the meeting. Approximately 40 people attended.

The Valdosta Daily Times attended a dinner for the Community Blueprint personnel Monday evening and Tuesday's session.

Ryan said communities must become involved in helping military and their families. Government alone is not equipped to re-integrate military personnel into civilian life.

"These things don't get solved in Washington," Ryan said. "That's why we picked Valdosta, Title-Town USA, because you already have an outstanding reputation" for getting things done.

Verhey said the military has sergeants and other personnel to integrate a young soldier into military life. What the Community Blueprint hopes to provide are civilians to integrate outgoing military personnel back into civilian life.

Verhey used the example of an 18-year-old joining the military. Say, the teen marries as he's enlisting. He and his wife have a child or two. Since 9/11, military personnel spend the majority of their service deployed overseas, often in Iraq or Afghanistan.

At 22, he's out of the military. He has two young children. He has a young wife with whom he's possibly spent 12 months out of the past four years. "He's no longer the same man who married her, and she's no longer the same

woman," Verhey said.

The young veteran has also gone from a military environment that cared for all of his needs, and offered him a challenge for his training. In a matter of months, the young veteran has moved from being in charge of a convoy surrounded by comrades to being alone, uncertain how to make ends meet, often unemployed, surrounded by a family of strangers. Being home doesn't compare to his military life.

"You know the old saying, Once in Paris, it's tough to come back to Missouri," Verhey said. "Well, and I mean no offense by this, but it's true, once in Afghanistan, it's tough to come back to Valdosta."

Community Blueprint hopes to ease this transition by addressing eight areas of need: behavioral health, education, employment, family strength, financial-legal services, homelessness, reintegration, and volunteerism.

Verhey suggested Valdosta could find someone to lead the Blueprint effort then find a person to lead each area of need. He suggested that someone could approach various employers and request a pledge to hire a certain number of returning veterans each year. He said the Community Blueprint is just what the name suggests, a basic blueprint to help veterans and their families.

Army Lt. Col. Tony Forbes with the Office of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Warrior and Family Support explained when he refers to veterans, he includes the military member's spouse and children.

On Monday evening, Forbes said the Community Blueprint team wants to learn what's working in communities to share with other communities.

But it also wants to emphasize a hard fact. A community may be addressing 40 percent of the situation well, but Community Blueprint wants to develop strategies to address the other 60 percent.

On Tuesday, he discussed today's warriors' "invisible wounds." Forbes thanked veterans of past wars for making it possible for today's warriors to openly discuss the traumatic scenes they have witnessed.

From Day One, military members are trained as a team. They operate as a team. But when they come home, the team is gone. Community Blueprint could create a system that would "have an enduring effect on veterans," Forbes said. "In military terms, our focus does not need to be on a target at 50 meters but on a target 300 meters out."

An Iraq veteran, Forbes shared a personal experience from the war in Baghdad. While preparing to eat, he and other military came under fire. They moved to battle stations. A vehicle approached. Forbes watched from a roof-top position as the U.S. military followed protocol to halt the vehicle. The vehicle did not stop. It reached the point when the military may use deadly force. The soldiers fired.

Inside the vehicle, they discovered a man and woman and four children, a family, all dead.

"What I saw that day, what weapons can do, haunts me to this day," Forbes said.

A fifth child, a girl, lived. She cried whenever the other soldiers held her with care. Though Forbes does not know why, she only stopped crying when handed to him.

He credited counseling, his wife and Jesus for helping him cope with his combat experiences. Forbes hopes to see Valdosta and other communities help veterans cope with their experiences as they return to civilian life.

**ARMY ER BRC**