



Making a difference one donation at a time!

From the president & Founder of the Veterans Support Organization

My name is Richard VanHouten, and I am the President and Founder of the Veterans Support Organization. Here is the history of the V.S.O, which will describe what we do, how we developed over the years ,and why we used certain methods in our organization today. V.S.O. has changed thousands of veterans' lives, and strives to meet and exceed the expectations of the public that we rely on solely for support.

How We Started:

VSO was started in Rhode Island in 2001. Originally, our mission was to establish a food bank for financially distressed or homeless veterans. As time passed, we found that many of these same veterans needed help with other expenses. They came to us for help with utilities, rent, car payments and other day-to-day expenses, that arose mainly because of their inability to maintain employment.

We started giving small grants to these veterans, but too often they would come back month after month with more requests for financial assistance. Many of them were homeless, or on the verge of becoming homeless.

We found that, for these veterans, financial assistance alone was not a cure to the problems they faced. A lack of training was the major reason for their inability to maintain steady employment, and in most cases, their lack of training was combined with post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) or other stress-related conditions.

The Challenge:

The means to provide these fellow veterans with employment training was a real challenge for us.

Our goal was further complicated by the fact that most of our young veterans had almost no prior independent living skills or work history other than what they

learned in the military. Our challenge was to find a way to use this training in civilian life.

What We Found:

We found that these veterans all had some very strong traits in common. First and foremost was their love and desire to assist one another. The bonds of brotherhood were deeply ingrained in their hearts, no matter how many disabilities they had or how little training in basic life skills or employment they had. They would do anything to help one another. No man left behind was part of their souls.

They also had the ability to work together as a team, and all of them respected their uniform. No matter if they were homeless, without laundry facilities and were living in the park out of plastic bags, any part of their military uniform or any service related item, was always cared for, neatly folded and safely guarded within their possessions.

We needed to take these shared traits, and their burning desire to once again bond together as brothers, and use these heartfelt assets in a way that would produce a self-sufficient individual who could obtain and hold a job long enough to get off the streets, into housing, and financially sustain themselves in a realistic manner.

The Development of Our Methods:

At first, we tried referring them to jobs in the community, but many would show up unshaven, unwashed and in wrinkled clothes, or not show up for days at a time.

They had no desire to sell burgers or build houses. In many cases, it was difficult to get them to focus on even the most basic requirements for long-term job retention, because of their disabilities.

Job placement, without training was not working, and at the same time we needed help to continue our mission. So one day we had a couple of the homeless veterans help us at VSO and we discovered that when they worked together as a team, and they believed in the cause, "helping other veterans", their behavior completely reverted to their military training.

They started showing up in military shirts or pants they got at Army-Navy stores or from thrift shops, and amazingly, when they wore them, they were always clean and well pressed. So one day, we decided to buy some used BDU's for the guys helping out, and once again the behavior of these homeless veterans, who just weeks before showed a lack of interest in work or taking care of their appearance, was transformed back to military traits of cleanliness, self respect, and bonding in brotherhood. (Today we find the use of a uniform a great tool in our training process).

It was becoming clear that we could get them to work and show up on time if they worked together for something they believed in. Now, the challenge was to get them to do it long enough in the community so that it became routine to them, and then, hopefully, these traits would carry over into any future employment.

Our Options:

By now we had 8 or 10 veterans helping out weekly, mostly showing up in clean, and pressed uniforms, looking like a small outfit. More and more wanted to join our cause, but with funding limited we started exploring our options as a non-profit veterans group.

We first looked at hiring a telemarketing group to call people, asking for donations. They claimed to raise millions for groups like highway patrol and similar causes. Well, we figured that sounded great. I mean, would you rather give a buck to a guy who gives you a ticket or someone who served in the Armed Forces to protect our American values and freedom?

But after investigating this process further, we discovered that the people calling and asking for donations were getting paid like ten or fifteen dollars per hour as paid fundraisers. Then the cost of leads and phone lines, and everything else, would give our group five cents of every dollar donated. We scratched that idea.

One good thing did come out of this idea; we discovered that there are thousands of jobs out there for people who can ask for donations. (Actually, last year there were 4.2 billion dollars raised for charity, and it was the paid solicitors who raised almost all of it.) We thought; why not train our vets to fill these fundraising positions?

Another way we found to raise money was to work like the Salvation Army or the Boy Scouts, who go into public areas and ask people to help their cause. Well, this seemed more reasonable, and we had a couple of veterans and non-veteran friends or family members of veterans who were willing to do this; so off we went.

Sure enough, we raised some funds and were able to expand our services to a few more veterans. This small group of individuals, helping us raise funds in the community, would show up every weekend, clean and presentable, ready to work together to help veterans.

This continued for a while, until one day, one of the veterans said he found a full-time, paying job raising money for another group. He thanked us profusely. He told us that if it were not for us showing him that he could make a difference, while teaching him how to be presentable in public, he never would have thought

of looking for work helping others or been able to say he had experience with fundraising.

A Plan is developed:

Okay, if we got one unemployed vet working full time and off the streets, how many more could we get to follow? We now had an idea that became the lynchpin of the VSO as it is today.

By now we were convinced that by combining the strength of brotherhood with the knowledge that the efforts put forth by the trainee were helping others, we would create a motivation strong enough to overcome the PTSD and other conditioning hindering the training.

We still had to overcome the habits and conditioning of long-term homelessness demonstrated by these vets, but we found some psychological research existed covering this problem. It was shown that repeating an activity considered uncomfortable over and over again, transformed the activity from a chore to a routine.

(Phillippa Lally and colleagues from University College, London, recruited 96 people who were interested in forming a new habit. Participants were then asked daily how automatic their chosen behaviors felt. These questions included things like whether the behavior was 'hard not to do' and could be done 'without thinking'.

(When the researchers examined the different habits, many of the participants showed a curved relationship between practice and automaticity of the form. On average a plateau in automaticity was reached after 66 days. In other words it had become as much of a habit as it was ever going to become. Although the average was 66 days, there was marked variation in how long habits took to form. In this study, it took anywhere from 18 to 254 days.)

OK. So now we knew that we needed to get a training program that would require these homeless or disabled veterans to show up on time, clean, in neat clothing, and for a cause they believed, and do it for a long enough period of time to become a habit. But was that enough? Could they survive on the streets, alone and without any financial assistance for long enough to turn that way of life into a habit?

We then started looking at some of the older more established groups doing job training, and found that they often gave their trainees a stipend, or small amount of money while in training so they could realistically survive the training period without becoming destitute. This became another component towards being able to keep these veterans in training for the period of time it took to change old habits and develop new ones. We still provide a stipend to trainees and employ trainers to work with them for as long as it takes to teach good work habits.

The OJT Program:

Today, VSO has 12 chapters combining these different components into what is called “A Future in Fundraising” on-the-job training program.

We have combined the many experiences of different groups and organizations with scientific research to develop a 66-284 day work training program that has helped hundreds of veterans get off the streets, gain self respect and become once again self sufficient.

Today we get most of the participants in the OJT Program from Veterans Shelters or VA referrals. We team them up with experienced trainers who graduated the program and who decided to give back by dedicating their lives to making a change in a veteran’s life.

The participants in the OJT Program train in the field in various positions. Some sell coupon books to business and individuals for discounted meals; some request donations at retail locations; some work in the VSO thrift store; others help maintain and manage “Veterans New Life Haven,” our 150-bed homeless veterans sober house in Ft. Lauderdale; and still others graduate to become trainers. Each learns a marketable skill and has the option of living at one of the VSO Housing Centers.

Recently, we opened an 8500 sq. ft. training center in Mt. Vernon, New York that will provide training to over 200 homeless and unemployed veterans annually, and offer enhanced training in the areas of fundraising, office support training, bank teller training, transportation dispatch training, retail training in a PX for veterans, computer lab training, and housing maintenance. The Center also offers courses, free to veterans, in business ethics and personal budgeting. The facility has also employed several Certified Relapse Prevention Specialists to deal with the growing issues of substance abuse among veterans.

In Florida, VSO’s “Veterans New Life Haven” has expanded from 50 beds to a capacity of over 150, for sober housing of veterans. Several new chapters opened in 2009 and 2010, including the Tri-State Chapter serving New York, New Jersey and Connecticut, and new chapters in Tennessee and Texas.

Last year, in 2009, VSO raised, through the various OJT programs, over two million dollars, and not only was able to expand services and programs to veterans in various states, but donated over \$1,600,000 to assist veterans directly or through such organizations as the Volunteer Service Division of the VA Health Care System, and other veterans groups.

Now, I know this sounded easy and organized, but to tell the truth, this took ten plus years of sixteen-hour days, countless hours of volunteer assistance, and it had its good moments as well as some really bad moments. We changed hundreds of

lives and touched thousands more veterans in a positive fashion, but unfortunately, we were unable to help all the veterans needing assistance.

We lost some good men along the way also. These men deserved a chance to change and an opportunity to better their standing in society, but we could not accept everyone who applied for housing or training, and it is these individuals who we remember the most. It's for these men and women that we continue to push forward to make a difference.

We welcome all other veterans' organizations around the county to use our services, including the grant process, which provides financial assistance to veterans. We will provide OJT and housing to veterans referred by any group. We open our doors to all veterans and veterans' groups whose mission is to change the life of a disadvantaged veteran, and I have an open-door policy to all veterans and veterans' groups who wish to avail themselves of our services.

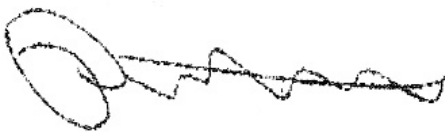
We hope that in the coming years all U.S. Veterans will band together to present a united front to obtain the assistance for our heroes they so desperately deserve.

And to think, all this was a byproduct of trying to feed a few veterans in Rhode Island!

Oh, one last item of interest. In our bylaws we have a firm rule that the donations raised by each chapter go back to the community where they were raised. So rest assured that when residents of your state donate to a VSO trainee in your area, that donation will go to serve someone you may have seen or even know, because it is guaranteed to be used in your area.

I hope this assists your understanding our group.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Richard VanHouten, Jr.", with a large, stylized initial "R" and a long, wavy tail.

Richard VanHouten, Jr.
President and Founder