

Apartment complex, built out of recycled shipping containers, houses once-homeless vets

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MIDWAY CITY, Calif. -- This past week, the new Secretary of Veterans Affairs said his department will try to cut the number of homeless veterans in the U.S. from about 40,000 to somewhere below 15,000 during the Trump administration.

"I served my country, you know, you just do what you are told, that's all you can do," says Dale Dollar, who was in his 20s when he left the Marines.

As a civilian, business ventures stalled. He found himself out of work, and eventually out on the street. Homeless for 14 years, until he found Potters Lane.

"This place, they don't talk about it, they walk the walk and talk the talk," Dollar says.



Potters Lane in Midway City, Calif., is a housing complex for homeless veterans. CBS News

The entire apartment complex was built for homeless veterans. But that's not what makes it unique -- it's the first multi-family building, constructed entirely of recycled shipping containers.

Most of the \$1,200 monthly rent is subsidized, according to Steven Forry, chief development officer for American Family Housing, the group behind the project.

"In Orange County on any given night, there are between 400 and 450 homeless veterans, which for us is a national crime. There should be no homeless veterans," Forry says.

It took about six months to convert 48 shipping containers that had previously been used to transport dry goods into 16 studio apartments that are each about 500 square feet.

And while these steel-walled containers are strong enough to be stacked 10 stories high, organizers kept it small for a reason.



Potters Lane in Calif. is taking recycled shipping containers and turning them into studio apartment for homeless vets. CBS News

"When you're dealing with people who have been homeless and you warehouse them in 300 units, you are not creating a safety net for people, you are not creating a human connection with people," Forry says. "The concept here is called housing first. Find a home for them like we found here and then you surround them with social services."

Kurt Carson also served in the Marines. And like Dollar, he lived along this Santa Ana River bed for six years.

"If you can't get mail, or you can't go somewhere to clean up, and you don't have any place where you can you know, have a phone number, then how do you think somebody's gonna reintegrate into society? It's not gonna happen," Carson says.

After more than a decade without a roof over his head, Dollar is finally able to cook a warm meal in his own kitchen.



Dale Dollar lives in Potters Lane, California. CBS News

"It's quite a place. You know you come in when you've been sleeping in a tent on the dirt and rocks for years and have to fight to keep your stuff and you end up in a place as beautiful as this?" Dollar says. "Oh, I've been blessed more than I should have been. It's wonderful."

For Dollar, it's not just a new apartment, it's a new lease on life.