

New Orleans mayor announces “end” to veteran homelessness

By Tom Hall
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New Orleans mayor Mitch Landrieu held a press conference January 7 to announce that he had “ended” veterans’ homelessness in the city, making it the first major city to do so, as part of an initiative sponsored by first lady Michelle Obama. The claim is a complete fraud, and comes from an administration that has moved to harass and criminalize the city’s enormous homeless population.

In a Fourth of July ceremony last summer at the National World War II Museum in downtown New Orleans, Landrieu and his sister, then-senator Mary Landrieu, announced that the city would join Michelle Obama’s “Mayors Challenge to End Veterans Homelessness” and move to officially eliminate veterans homelessness by the end of the year. The initiative, little more than a charity drive, was announced the previous June by Michelle Obama and HUD Secretary Shaun Donovan at a roundtable in Washington, DC that Mayor Landrieu attended.

The Landrieu administration’s claim to have “ended” veterans homelessness is based on having provided temporary housing assistance to 227 homeless veterans since July, more than the 193 homeless veterans recorded in the city during a count conducted over a single night in March of 2014. This method of counting the number of homeless has repeatedly been criticized over the years, as the actual number of homeless people on the streets or in shelters is in constant flux and varies greatly from season to season.

A city official admitted to the New Orleans *Times-Picayune* that this does not mean that there are no homeless veterans on the streets of New Orleans. “There could be a homeless veteran living in an abandoned house right now that we don’t know about and he could have been there for the past month. But we’ve built this machine where we can house homeless

veterans rapidly.”

In fact, no new social programs have been developed as part of Landrieu’s initiative. The primary focus has been to improve “coordination” between various charities and government agencies offering housing assistance through existing programs.

The responsibility for identifying homeless veterans falls upon the charitable organizations, who then report them to Veteran’s Affairs’ Supportive Services for Veterans Families Program. According to the *Times-Picayune*, the VA then “conducts an assessment of the veterans, confirms their military records, determines their mental and physical needs and then provides up to five months of rental assistance to get them off the streets,” the maximum duration of assistance under the program.

Charitable organizations then help the veterans find more permanent rental assistance from other government programs. As long as veterans are receiving temporary assistance for housing they would otherwise be unable to afford, they are officially classified as having “permanent housing,” according to the VA’s definition, underscoring the fraud of Landrieu’s claim to have “permanently housed” 227 veterans.

Federal rental assistance programs have been slashed as part of the Obama administration’s austerity drive. Last year, the Center for Budget and Policy Priorities released a study that 100,000 fewer families were receiving housing assistance in 2014 than before the so-called “sequester cuts” in 2013. (See: 100,000 fewer US families receive housing aid due to budget cuts)

The centerpiece of Landrieu’s campaign is a private \$7.6 million mixed-income housing development that opened in December, for which the city contributed a mere \$1.2 million. Only 55 of the building’s 109 units

will actually be available to the “chronically homeless.” Currently, only 22 formerly homeless veterans are living in the complex.

While making a public show of helping homeless veterans, the Landrieu administration has been far more concrete in its assault on the city’s huge homeless population in general. Beginning in August the city began a series of high-profile clearances of homeless encampments in and around downtown, evicting hundreds of people. In September, the city council passed an ordinance banning “obstructions” such as tents and chairs from overpasses, regardless of whether they were obstructing traffic.

The excitement generated in the media by Landrieu’s announcement was briefly pierced by a report on Friday by local TV station WWL, which decided to speak to homeless people in order to investigate the mayor’s claims. Within five minutes of searching, the station’s reporters found a veteran in the well-known homeless encampment under Ponchartrain Expressway who told them that he had not received any offers of assistance.

That homeless people are still on the streets of New Orleans was verified by a reporting team for the *World Socialist Web Site*. Michael Terrell, a veteran, was the first person that reporters spoke to. He has been homeless for a month and a half after losing his job. He disagreed with Landrieu’s claim to have ended veteran homelessness. “No, they ain’t solved it,” he said. “Have you seen over there, by the library? People still sleep over there. I figured they’d get people off the streets. They said they’d get vets off the streets. I’m a vet!”

WSWS reporters also spoke to homeless people underneath Ponchartrain Expressway. A man who asked not to be identified told reporters, “[The housing assistance] is not really for life. They just tell you that. They want you to be on your own so they don’t have to deal with you. They put so much pressure on the homeless in those apartments that a lot of them decide it’s easier to just be homeless. Then they can say, ‘Oh well. We tried to help but they wouldn’t help themselves.’”