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Rep. Gilliard takes message on homelessness to D.C.

Legislator proposes study of problem among veterans

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Charleston Democratic Rep. Wendell Gilliard took his campaign against homelessness to Washington to deliver a message to President Obama and South Carolina's congressional delegation.

Gilliard said he wants to tap federal dollars to help get the homeless in shelters and permanent homes while he brings more awareness to the plight of the men, women and children without a place to live.

"I've been taught that you live as if you're one step away from being homeless," Gilliard said Monday. "It makes you more humble, more involved and it makes you want to lift that stigma: Homeless people are not tired. They aren't lazy. They are just down for the moment."

Gilliard plans to hold a day-long seminar this November in Charleston that will bring stakeholders together to form an action plan. One outcome Gilliard expects is the production of a booklet for homeless that will list resources available by county and details on the services provided at specific agencies, such as food banks, soup kitchens and shelters.

He said he thinks his ideas are gaining traction. About 30 city and state leaders and advocates attended an August meeting Gilliard organized in Charleston. He said he is not looking for big crowds but wants to bring interested parties together for constructive dialogue.

During his visit to Washington last week, Gilliard said he was given a guided tour of the White House by David Agnew, a liaison for the Obama administration to the nation's mayors. Agnew is an Anderson native and former executive assistant for Mayor Joe Riley.

Gilliard said Agnew pledged to get his message to the president.

On Monday, U.S. Sen. Lindsey Graham and 1st District U.S. Rep. Henry Brown, both Republicans, said they will work with Gilliard.

More information

H 4006, A joint resolution to establish a committee to study veteran issues: homelessness, unemployment, job placement, post-traumatic stress disorder, access to basic human services

H 4091, A bill to amend the code of laws of South Carolina ... so as to create the hate crime of assault and battery upon a homeless person

Brown, the current ranking Republican on the Veterans Affairs Subcommittee on Health, said the country must provide satisfactory and timely care to the servicemen and women to help them reintegrate into society.

"Ultimately, a veteran who does not receive the proper health and education benefits or job training is likely to end up among the 131,000 veterans on the street on any given night," Brown said in a statement. "Current programs have nearly halved the number of homeless veterans, but we can and must do more."

In March, the House unanimously passed legislation that would extend the Homeless Veterans Reintegration Program through 2014, according to Brown's office.

The program would provide grants for job training and extend services to homeless female veterans and homeless veterans with children. The bill is pending action in the Senate's Committee on Veterans' Affairs.

Gilliard has introduced two bills at the state level that are awaiting action in the House. One would establish a committee to study veteran homelessness, unemployment and the impact of post-traumatic stress disorder, as well as other issues.

The second bill would make it a hate crime to assault a homeless person and sets penalties.

Additionally, Gilliard wants the federal government to provide more money for organizations that try to help the homeless and offer tax incentives for private businesses that hire homeless individuals, among other actions.

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