



Homelessness Among Veterans

THE PROBLEM

While the number of Veterans experiencing homelessness has been declining over the past two years, 107,000 former service men and women were homeless on a given night in 2009 as estimated by the VA. Sixty-one percent of homeless Veterans are between ages 35 and 54. Though 96 percent of homeless Veterans are male, the number of female Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans experiencing homelessness is increasing as is the number of homeless Veterans who have dependent children. In general, Veterans have high rates of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, traumatic brain injury, and sexual trauma, which can lead to higher risk for homelessness. About half of homeless Veterans have serious mental illness and 70 percent have substance abuse problems. Half of homeless Veterans have histories of involvement with the legal system. Veterans are more likely to live outdoors—unsheltered—and experience long-term, chronic homelessness.

THE PLAN

Opening Doors: Federal Strategic Plan to Prevent and End Homelessness sets the goal of ending homelessness for Veterans in five years with the joint action of federal, state, and local leaders together with service providers, advocates, the private sector, and faith-based, philanthropic, and community organization leaders. To focus on strategies that have proven successful in helping homeless Veterans obtain affordable housing, jobs, and access to health and behavioral health care, strategic action is concentrated in five key areas:

1. Provide Affordable Housing

The Plan seeks to expand affordable housing opportunities through improved targeting of current housing programming that provides rental subsidies as well as an increase in construction of new or rehabilitated housing.

2. Provide Permanent Supportive Housing

We know what works. The research is clear that permanent supportive housing using a Housing First approach is the primary solution. This intervention quickly moves people off the street or out of temporary shelter into stable, affordable housing with intensive supportive services to address mental health, substance abuse, health, and employment needs.

Evaluations of permanent supportive housing have demonstrated significant improvements in housing stability, reductions in days of homelessness, and reductions in the utilization and costs of public services such as emer-

gency shelter, hospital emergency room and inpatient care, sobering centers, and jails. For example, Medicaid costs declined by 41 percent and average total costs decreased more than 75 percent after one year in supportive housing in Seattle. In the federal Collaborative Initiative to Help End Chronic Homelessness, participants were placed rapidly into permanent housing and 95 percent were in independent housing after one year. Average costs for health care and treatment were reduced by about half. The largest decline was associated with costs for inpatient hospital care.

Opening Doors seeks to expand the supply of permanent supportive housing to Veterans. Better coordinated sources of funding are also critical.

3. Increase Meaningful and Sustainable Employment

Programs designed to connect Veterans to employment must also consider the particular needs of Veterans who are experiencing homelessness rather than creating barriers to access and support. Best practices must be implemented and employment strategies must be coordinated with housing and other interventions to provide workforce training and guidance for job seekers.

4. Reduce Financial Vulnerability

While many Veterans experiencing or most at risk of homelessness are eligible for the unique and robust services available to Veterans, many lack awareness of the programs or are ambivalent about seeking care. Discharge status or lack of records also creates complications in accessing services. Enhanced information, reduced barriers, and improved access to services are key to reducing financial vulnerability for Veterans.

5. Transform Homeless Services to Crisis Response Systems

Communities that retool their crisis response systems with a focus on prevention and rapid re-housing will achieve greater success in housing Veterans.

SIGNATURE INITIATIVE

USICH is facilitating collaborative efforts by the VA, HUD, Labor, and HHS to align resources for greater effectiveness by bringing together programs that would otherwise operate separately. By testing models of local/federal collaboration on behalf of Veterans, the lessons learned can be applied in other communities thus expanding the number of homeless Veterans who benefit.