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Finding Their Way Home: Rethinking Homelessness for Veterans in Central Florida

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This report was prepared exclusively for



“When a Veteran comes home kissing the ground, it is unacceptable that he should ever have to sleep on it.”

– First Lady, Michelle Obama

“We must make investments¹ on behalf of the Veterans who have honorably served our country but fallen on tough times... It’s about doing right by those who have bravely served our country.”

– Senator Jon Tester (D-MT)

“One of the things you learn in the Army is you never leave a soldier behind. Unfortunately, we’ve left some people behind, and they’re our homeless Veterans. VA is committed to achieving the goal of ending Veteran homelessness, and we won’t rest until every homeless Veteran has a place to call home.”

– Veterans Affairs Secretary Robert A. McDonald²

National Problems, National Changes



On street corners. Under bridges. On park benches. In dirty, bug-ridden motel rooms. Thousands of American Veterans become homeless each year, forcing the men and women who fight for our freedom in uniform to find new places to steal an hour or two of sleep.

2009

The Point in Time count, administered by the Department of Housing and Urban Development, (HUD) reported more than 131,000 homeless Veterans³ living without a permanent residence across the United States.⁴

2010

The same Point in Time count totaled more than 75,000 homeless Veterans nationwide.⁵ Declaring this crisis “morally unacceptable,” President Barack Obama committed his administration to the Ending Veteran Homelessness initiative, pursuing the aggressive goal of ending Veteran homelessness by 2015 as part of Opening Doors: The Federal Strategic Plan to Prevent and End Homelessness.⁶

Services Provided to Homeless Veterans



The United States Interagency Council on Homelessness (USICH) is an independent agency within the federal executive branch and is composed of the heads of nineteen departments and agencies within the federal government working with state and local partners.



The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) is the United States government’s principal agency for protecting the health of all Americans and providing essential human services. HHS has a portfolio of six programs specifically targeted to address the service needs of homeless persons: 1) Health Care for the Homeless, 2) Grants for the Benefit of Homeless Individuals, 3) Services in Supportive Housing, 4) Projects for Assistance in Transition from Homelessness, 5) Programs for Runaway and Homeless Youth, 6) the Federal Surplus Real Property program.



The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) is the federal agency responsible for national policy and programs that address the country’s housing needs. Through HUD’s targeted homeless programs, its mainstream housing and community development programs, and collaboration with both the Department of Veterans Affairs and the Department of Health and Human Services, HUD works to house the most vulnerable of the nation’s population while supporting community growth.



The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) firmly believes that one Veteran experiencing homelessness is one too many. As outlined in this report, the VA is taking decisive action toward this goal of eliminating homelessness among our nation’s Veterans. To achieve this goal, VA has implemented the Five-Year Plan to End Homelessness among Veterans that will assist every eligible Veteran willing to accept services.

2011

The VA and HUD adopted a new series of recognized, evidence-based practices for ending homelessness, including the Housing First and Rapid Re-Housing policies.⁷ With these initiatives, the government officially

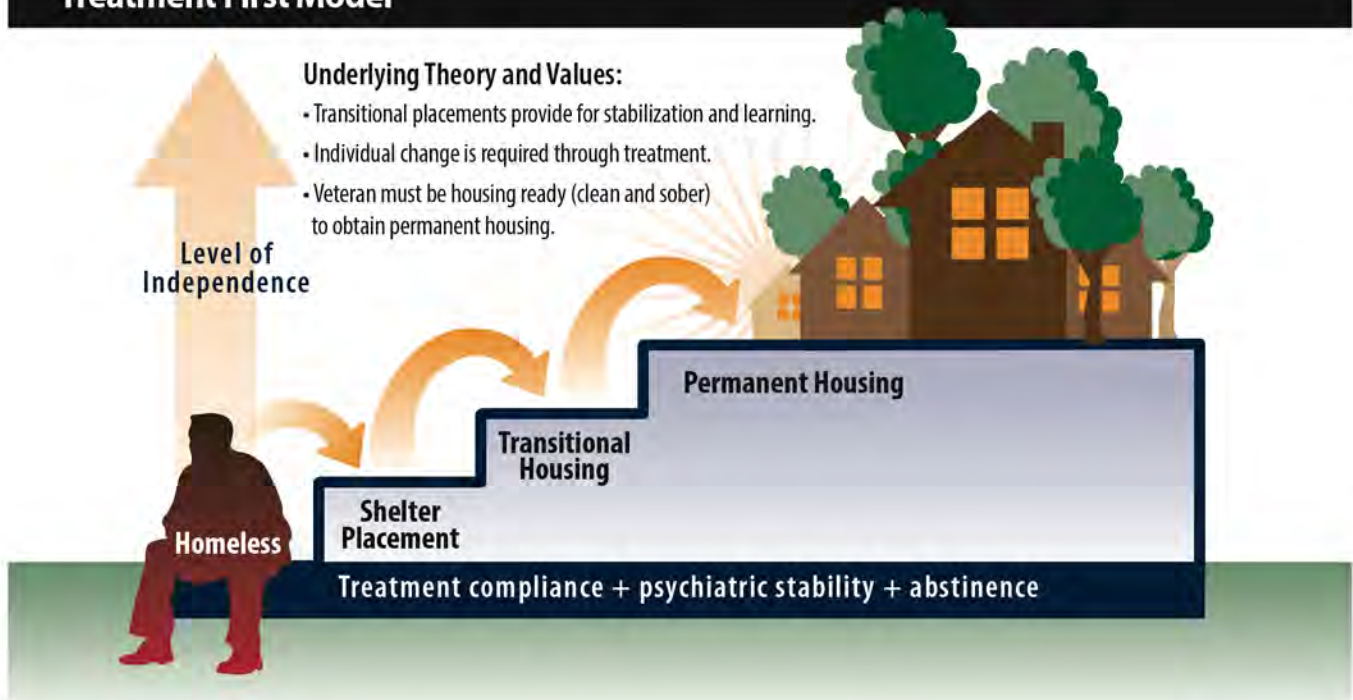
shifted its focus to placing Veterans in permanent housing before attempting to treat issues like addictions or mental health conditions.

The new approach quickly began to show positive results.

Through the renewed outreach

efforts and services like the HUD-VA Supportive Housing Program, (HUD-VASH), thousands of homeless Veterans have been provided with the permanent shelter and case management programs they need to get back on their feet.

Treatment First Model



Housing First Model



2012

The VA announced a partnership with the 100,000 Homes Campaign to better leverage resources between the efforts, including outreach, quality improvement training, and technical assistance with a goal of reducing the timeframe for housing a Veteran to less than 90 days.⁸

2013

The VA and HUD announced that they had allocated more than 58,000

Housing Choice vouchers to Veterans across the country.⁹ Through this program, a housing subsidy is paid to the landlord by the local public housing authority on behalf of the participating Veteran. The Veteran participates in case management services to encourage progress toward recovery goals, and pays based on his/her income (30% of adjusted gross income).¹⁰

While documenting the impact

of these changes in a 2014 study, researchers at the Birmingham VA Medical Center found that 80 to 90% of Veterans housed through the new VA programs were able to remain stable in that housing.¹¹

2014

HUD and the VA announced that the annual Point in Time count demonstrated a 33% drop in Veteran homelessness—down to 49,993 from the count in 2010.¹²

LOCAL CHALLENGES, LOCAL SOLUTIONS

“Orlando has a unique opportunity to collaborate as a community to solve issues involving Veteran Homelessness. As a community, we can build successful programs with the support of community leaders, local businesses and Veterans organizations to reach every Veteran in need.”

*Timothy W. Liezert
Director
Orlando VA Medical Center*

“Getting Veterans off the streets, stably housed and back to living independently is essential in doing our part to the Veteran who signed on the dotted line for our freedom. Most come in broken and want someone to listen to them and let them vent about their story. We are listening to them by interpreting what they are saying and by responding with action, whether it be advocating for them, escorting them to medical appointments or filling their refrigerators with food.”

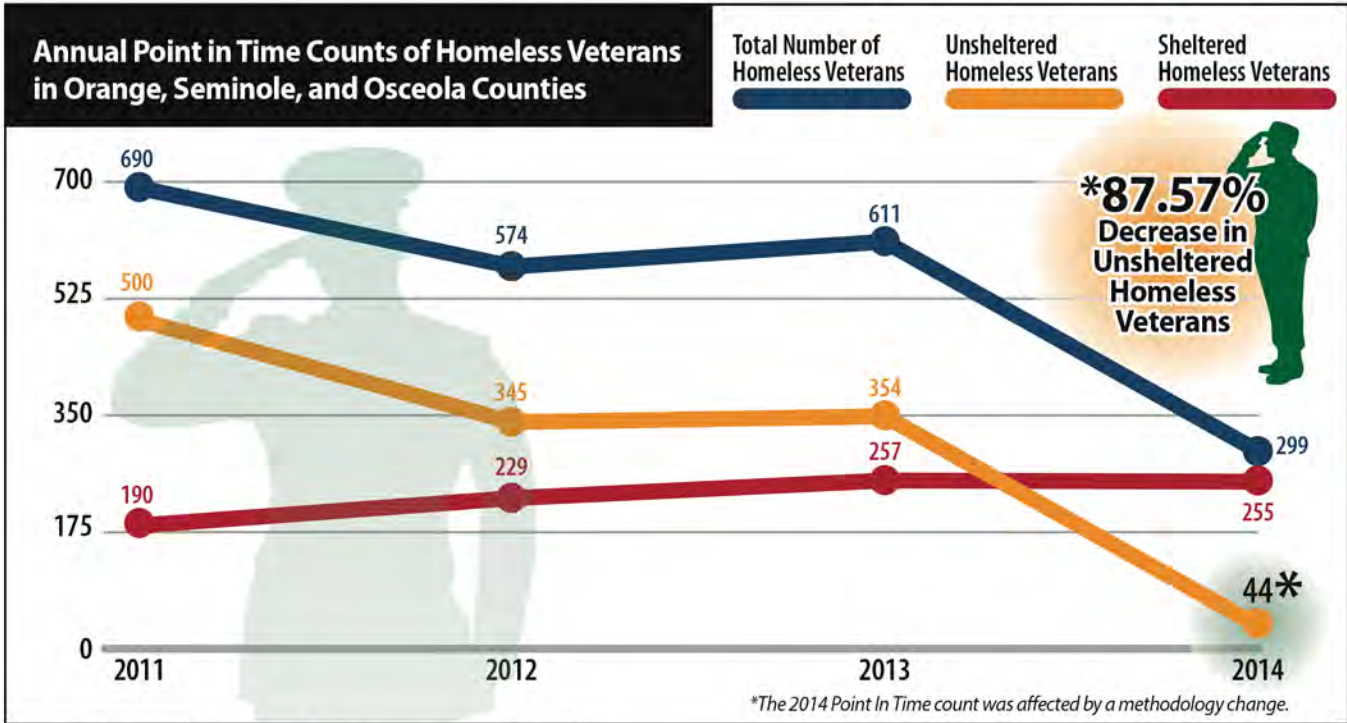
*Rob Kleiman, MSW
HUD-VASH Social Worker
Orlando VA Medical Center*

“We are working with both VA resources and community partners to reach out, house, and support homeless Veterans. Initially housing someone is just the start. We must listen to what’s important to the Veteran and make sure there are on going supports in order to maintain meaningful permanent housing.”

*Ken Mueller, LCSW
Health Care for Homeless Veterans
Program Manager
Orlando VA Medical Center*



The process often starts through direct outreach and community collaboration.



Source: HUD-VASH Resource Guide for Permanent Housing and Clinical Care

The national VA identified Central Florida as a priority region for action because of the high concentration of homeless Veterans who live here.

2011

In Central Florida, the Homeless Services Network, the HUD Continuum of Care responsible for administering the Point In Time counts, reports 690 homeless Veterans living in the area.

The same year, the *Orlando Sentinel* reported that Florida was home to the second-largest population of homeless Veterans in the country, and that the population of homeless

Veterans in Orange, Osceola, and Seminole counties specifically had nearly doubled.¹³

2012

From 2011 to 2012, the tri-county Central Florida area experienced a near 17% reduction in its Veteran homelessness.

2013

According to the January 2013 Point in Time count, the Orange, Seminole and Osceola county area contained one of the highest numbers of homeless Veterans when comparing regions of similar size.¹⁴

2014

Orlando was selected for the VA's 25 Cities Initiative and under the leadership of Mayor Buddy Dyer and Mayor Teresa Jacobs, joined the Mayor's Challenge to End Veteran Homelessness when it was announced in June.¹⁶

Since beginning its Central Florida outreach in 2011, the VA has given priority support to the Greater Orlando area, assisting local homeless Veterans by providing nearly 649 HUD-VASH vouchers and funding a range of transitional housing opportunities within their six-county service area.¹⁷



Stand Down events offer Veterans showers, haircuts, medical services, dental screening, access to housing resources, and more.



A vertical graphic of the American flag, showing the stars and stripes, positioned on the left side of the page.

Program Spotlight: HUD-VASH

What makes the VA program work so effectively? Regardless of whether you are a Veteran in New Orleans, Salt Lake City or Orlando, the process for identification, housing and providing resources is consistent at every Veterans Administration, with minor variations. The focus of the program is to assist Veterans who are experiencing chronic homelessness.

The steps that make this program work include:

- Step 1:** The VA works within the community to identify Veterans most in need of assistance by seeking out those with frequent or sustained episodes of homelessness, mental health or medical issues who recurrently visit shelters, emergency rooms, and other programs. The program takes a “no wrong door” approach, identifying Veterans through many entry points including direct street outreach.
- Step 2:** Once the Veteran is identified, a Case Manager is assigned to him or her to assess individual needs and help establish specific goals for housing and treatment of issues that may be contributing to homelessness. Case management support is ongoing and, as the relationship develops, will include services like medical care referrals, substance abuse treatment and money management assistance as needed.
- Step 3:** Once a Veteran’s eligibility has been determined by the VA, a referral is made to the Public Housing Authority for application and screening. If he or she does not meet the requirements for this specific program, the case manager will work with community partners to determine and pursue other housing options.¹⁸ This is why community-based support and partnerships continue to be an integral part of the VA system.
- Step 4:** The Veteran and Case Manager work together to find appropriate, affordable housing that meets his or her needs and preferences.
- Step 5:** The Veteran moves into his or her new home.
- Must be eligible for VA Health Care Services
 - Must require case management services to obtain and maintain stable housing
 - Must meet the McKinney-Vento Act definition of homelessness by:
 - o Lacking a consistent, stable nighttime residence
 - o Identifying his/her residence as a shelter or temporary housing option or area not typical of a residence

HUD-VASH is only one of the many programs and services working toward the goal of elimination of Veterans Homelessness. Others include:

Veterans Justice Outreach: Partnerships with law enforcement, courts and judges in the establishment of courts to ensure Veterans within the legal system have access to continued services and treatments²⁰

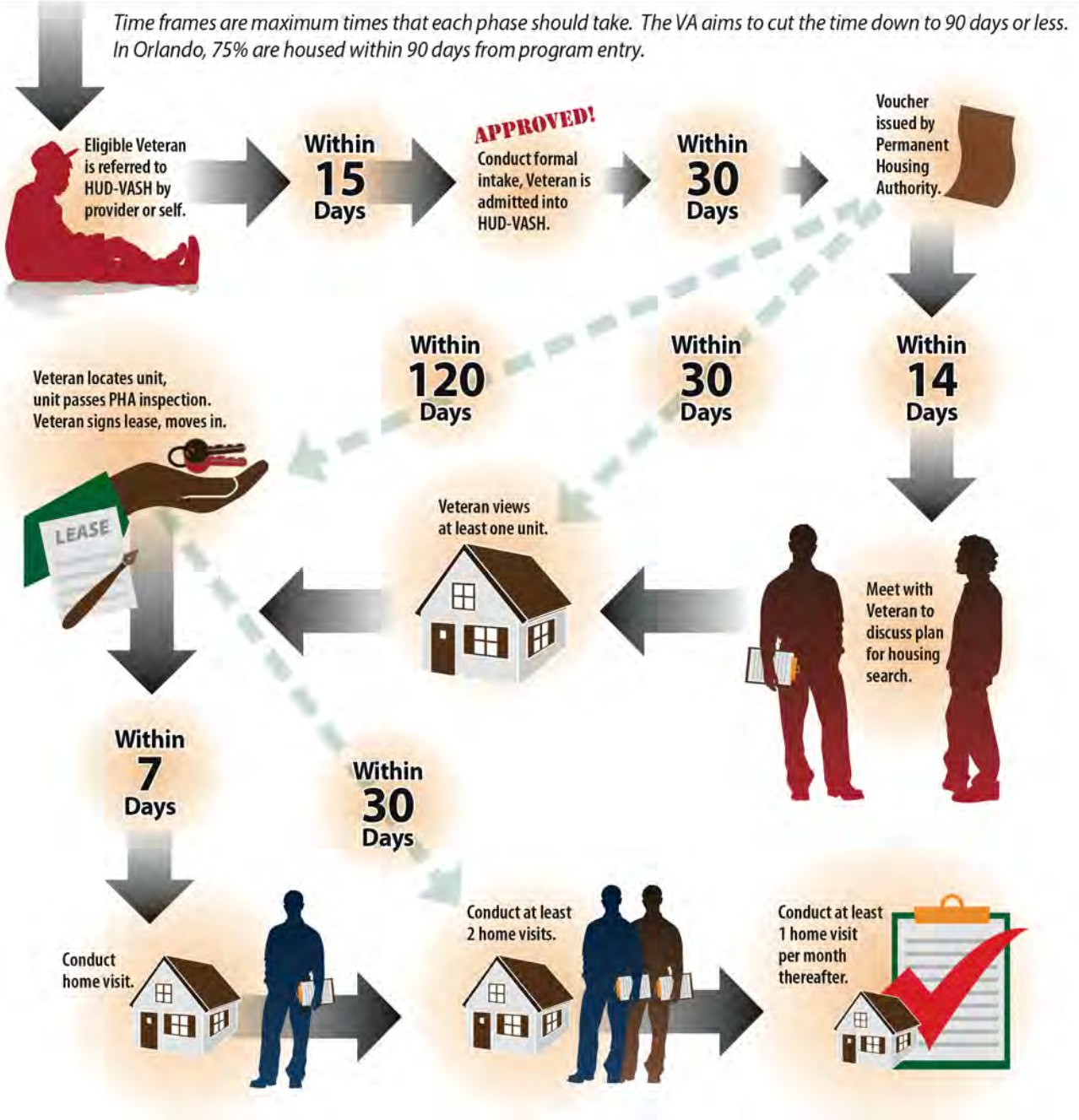
Emergency Contract Housing: Immediate shelter housing

Grant Per Diem (GDP) Transitional Housing: A funding program for community agencies that provide housing or services to homeless Veterans²¹

Domiciliary Care for Homeless Veterans: A clinical rehabilitation and treatment program and the VA's oldest healthcare program²²

Supportive Services for Veteran Families (SSVF): A funding and technical assistance program for non-profit, community-based agencies that help Veterans stay in their homes²³

HUD-VASH Housing Process



19 Source: HUD-VASH Resource Guide for Permanent Housing and Clinical Care

Results

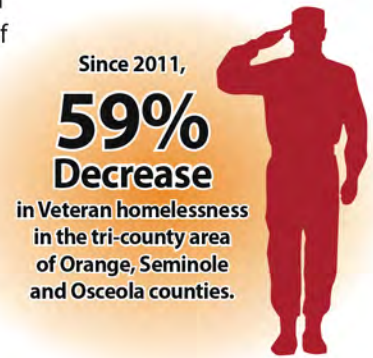
The VA leaders in Central Florida are actively coordinating with community leaders and service providers across the region to ensure that no Veteran is sleeping on any Central Florida streets by the end of 2015.

And because they are applying the proven steps of the national HUD-VASH model of finding housing for our Veterans first, the effort is working:

Since 2011, the tri-county area of Orange, Seminole and Osceola counties has experienced a 59% decrease in total Veterans homelessness.

2,466 homeless Veterans in the larger six county service area were served by the Corporate Orlando VA Healthcare System in fiscal year 2014 as well.²⁴

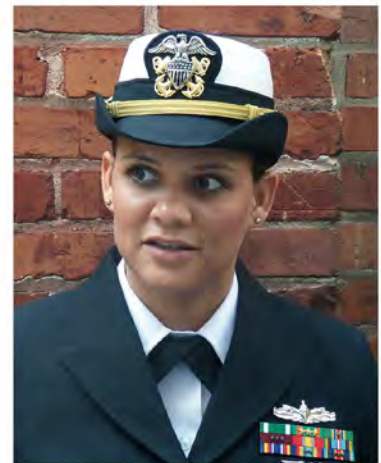
As of February 22, 2015, 866 formerly homeless Veterans are currently being housed as a result of these efforts, and those who move through the HUD-VASH program most often leave with positive outcomes and continue to experience stable housing outside of the service.



Six County VAMC Service Area Demographics

Fiscal Year Runs October 1-September 30

	Fiscal Year 2009 to Current	FY '09	FY '10	FY '11	FY '12	FY '13	FY '14	Fiscal Year To Date as of 2/22/2015
Unique Encounters	3,735	164	631	953	1,397	1,716	1,734	1,492
Average Age	47.5	52.4	51.9	51.8	52	51.8		
Females	448	17	64	113	167	206	215	188
Females %	12%	10%	10%	12%	12%	12%	12%	13%
New HUD-VASH Move-ins	1,264	46	196	192	214	234	273	141



Veteran service organizations, community volunteers, non-profits, and more partner with the VA to reach out and serve homeless Veterans.



New Orleans Ends Veterans Homelessness

In January of 2015, the city of New Orleans announced that they were the first in the nation to end Veterans Homelessness. Through community leadership, collaborative efforts and commitment to this worthy cause, the city was able to house 227 Veterans one year ahead of goal.

Seven key strategies were identified as contributing to this success:

LEADERSHIP

- City leadership's "very public involvement" in these efforts raising awareness and increasing opportunities for cross-sector partnerships

PARTNERSHIPS

- Multiple governmental departments, agencies and private organizations joined together on a weekly basis to discuss needs, resource availability and goals to be achieved

"THE MASTER LIST"

- This was an initial list of Veterans determined to be homeless by original "Point-in-Time" count definition. This list was then narrowed by program eligibility to help determine the most appropriate intervention at an individual level

NAVIGATORS

- Experienced outreach teams partnered with trained personnel for the identification of homeless Veterans in the community and assistance in completion of necessary program paperwork

REMOVING BARRIERS

- A refocus and prioritization of existing resources and housing programs toward homeless Veterans

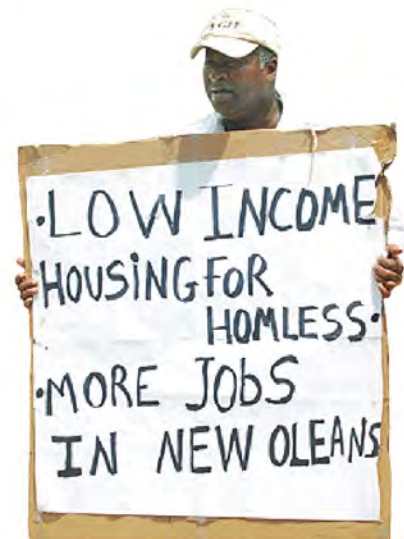
FINDING NEW PATHWAYS TO HOUSING

- A rethinking of existing housing options and creation of new housing options for this population. This required the ability to move homeless Veterans between established housing programs in ways not previously done

DATA COLLECTION AND SHARING

- Barriers to data sharing were removed, allowing for better accuracy in tracking and increased communication between agencies

Source: "Answering the Challenge: Ending Veteran Homelessness in New Orleans"



Salt Lake City Rethinks Homelessness



Salt Lake City's VA began to RETHINK homelessness in 2009 by refocusing on both their permanent and transitional housing solutions. These dedicated leaders credit their success in the reduction of Veteran homelessness to these key strategies:

COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

- Continued collaboration with homeless shelters, mental health and substance abuse programs, housing authorities, workforce solutions and other similarly focused agencies and organizations

"ONE-STOP SHOP" SERVICES

- Single-source, coordinated services including medical care, substance abuse assistance, mental health services and case management as necessary

RELATIONSHIP BUILDING

- Building and maintenance of relationships with both community partners and the homeless community at large garnishing the respect and trust of homeless individuals in the city

Another key program is the Veterans Justice Outreach Program. The Salt Lake City VA became the first program in the nation to establish a Federal Veterans court, but at every level, the system is engaged with law enforcement, courts

and judges in the establishment of courts to ensure Veterans within the legal system have access to continued services and treatments.

Source: http://www.saltlakecity.va.gov/features/Veterans_Justice_Outreach.asp



The "no wrong door" approach of the VA ensures that Veterans are able to receive services through multiple access points.



Replicability

The success of Veteran focused programs across the United States leads many to ask, “Can the Veterans Administration process for housing be implemented to impact overall homeless populations in other communities?” The answer is YES.

A survey of 10 communities across America was performed recently with this exact aim.²⁵ While every population, city, and situation is different, the researchers identified common themes in the success of these communities in meeting their homeless challenges.

A NEED FOR LEADERSHIP:
Each of the programs evaluated was led by an individual or group with the authority and willingness to prioritize homelessness and commit time and resources to the issue and its solutions

In 2006, 70 leaders from all sectors in Minneapolis, Minnesota, including those from federal, state and local government, business, non-profits, faith and philanthropic agencies, joined forces to form the Commission to End Homelessness. These leaders together developed a 10 year plan to end homelessness in their area. Through their collective efforts and resources, and the high priority given to this

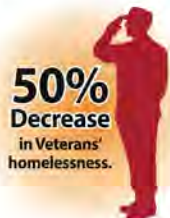
issue, Minneapolis saw a 39%



decrease in street homelessness and a 50% decrease in Veterans homeless and were well on their way to their goal of eliminating homelessness by 2016.

A NEED FOR COLLABORATION:
Communities that have shown progress in the reduction of homelessness have done so through collaboration amongst not only similarly-focused special interest groups, but collaboration between governmental, business, and philanthropic sectors

Los Angeles' homeless challenge is vast in comparison to many communities as a result of the enormity of its population, leading to its identification as the homeless capital of the nation. While there were resources and worthwhile programs in place, many of these services were siloed. This realization led the United Way of Greater Los Angeles to partner with the Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce to collaborate in areas of research, community engagement, grantmaking, and advocacy with elected officials toward shared goals. Through this partnership, they were able



to demonstrate the vast resources currently being spent on homelessness efforts and propose more efficient and collaborative methods of utilizing these funds.

A NEED FOR COMMITMENT:
The researchers discovered and recognized a community-wide “buy in” and commitment to the issue of homelessness and the resolutions necessary to overcome those issues

Marin County, California recognized the importance of community ownership in 2011 after the Marin Partnership to End Homelessness underwent a strategic planning process transforming it into an umbrella organization for the purpose of convening homeless-focused community agencies and programs. The partnership provides a forum and opportunity for local agencies to coordinate, advocate and impact change in their community.

Marin Partnership to End Homelessness





Phyllis Stroup, 59 years old - is a Vietnam Veteran who has been homeless for six years prior to receiving a HUD-VASH subsidy for an apartment. Photo by Judy Watson Tracy.

Conclusion

It is estimated that 732 Veterans will be homeless at some point between January 2014 and December 2015 within the Central Florida tri-county area.²⁶

While the news of reduction in Veterans homelessness on both a local and national level is positive, the VA and collaborating local groups still have a long road ahead before the 2015 goal can be achieved.

The VHA Homeless Programs Office has identified some of its ongoing challenges as:

- ensuring resources are used in the best way possible,
- needing adequate employment opportunities for homeless Veterans, and
- meeting housing needs for Veterans ineligible for VA services as a result of unfavorable discharge status or similar issues²⁷
- identifying landlords willing to work with the homeless Veteran population, especially those with credit issues and/or criminal histories, and
- finding partners willing to fund move-in costs (down payment assistance, furnishings, etc) not covered by VASH programs.

While barriers to ending homelessness still exist, the progress documented in this report demonstrates that homelessness is solvable and *Opening Doors*, the federal strategic plan, provides a needed framework for operationalizing proven solutions in communities across the country.



In addition to offering a variety of services and resources, peer support and case managers establish connections with Veterans during outreach events.

To finish the work of ending Veteran homelessness and begin to apply these and similar strategies to ALL homeless populations, Central Florida must come together, ask and answer the following questions and begin to **RETHINK and REDO** the way we provide support to the homeless in our community.

- Does our community see homelessness as an issue worthy of focus?
- Do we have engaged, committed, cross-sector leadership who are willing to shine a light on the issue of homelessness within their sphere of influence, then to dedicate the resources under their direction to a common plan and goal?
- Are we working collaboratively to ensure appropriate and efficient

use of resources? What additional opportunities for collaboration might we be missing?

- Do we seamlessly share data and information regarding services, population and progress?
- Are we willing to prioritize homelessness and redesign existing programs toward this prioritization?
- Are we willing to apply the *Open Door* framework as strategy to move great ideas into implementable actions?

Let us learn from the challenges and successes of others and apply this knowledge to our own community efforts in pursuit of ending homelessness in Central Florida.

Acknowledgements

Battling Veterans homelessness is a community issue very important to the Orlando Regional REALTOR® Association. As housing experts, the REALTOR® believe safe and secure housing is a key component to helping residents become a productive part of a healthy economy. When families have a secure, stable nighttime residence, they can build a foundation for self-sufficiency.

The Orlando Regional REALTOR® Association is uniquely positioned to provide leadership on the importance of addressing Veterans homelessness.

While REALTORS® bring enormous and diverse housing experience to the table, REALTORS® also bring a sincere desire to help our Veteran population find safe and affordable housing.

In addition to addressing the homeless issue among our Veteran population, the Orlando Regional REALTOR® Association, through its charitable organization – the Florida Real Estate Foundation, is also building six single family, ADA compliant homes for wounded, ill or injured Veterans. This project, Heroes' Commons at Jefferson Park, is a joint project with the City of Orlando and the anticipated start date for construction is April of 2015.

We wish to thank the Orlando Regional REALTOR® Association and the Florida Real Estate Foundation for their support of all Central Florida Veterans through the Heroes' Commons at Jefferson Park project as well as sponsoring this summary document.



We would also like to thank our local representatives of the Veterans Affairs for their service to the Veterans of Central Florida and their fulfillment of the larger VA mission through partnerships with private and community organizations toward common goals like the ending of Veterans homelessness.

The VA's recognition that safe and sustainable housing for those who have served our country not only fulfills the promise made by President Lincoln "to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow, and his orphan" but provides the needed foundation to care for Veterans physically, mentally and socially as well.



Footnotes

- 1** A note on money. The budget supporting Veteran homelessness efforts nationwide is \$1.6 billion for FY2015. Divided across an assumed 50,000 Veterans, that's about \$32,000 per veteran available.
- 2** <http://www.va.gov/opa/pressrel/pressrelease.cfm?id=2677>
- 3** <http://www.nationalhomeless.org/factsheets/veterans.pdf>
- 4** The Point in Time count is conducted annually one night in January across the United States. It is considered an annual benchmark for the population of sheltered and unsheltered homeless individuals nationwide.
- 5** http://www.va.gov/opa/speeches/2011/06_06_2011_national_coalition_for_homeless_veterans.asp
- 6** <http://www.whitehouse.gov/blog/2009/06/25/helping-homeless-veterans> ; http://www.va.gov/homeless/about_the_initiative.asp ; <http://www.va.gov/HOMELESS/docs/OpeningDoors2010FSP.pdf>
- 7** http://www.research.va.gov/pubs/docs/va_factsheets/Homelessness.pdf
- 8** www.va.gov/opa/pressrel/pressrelease.cfm?id=2321
- 9** <http://www.va.gov/homeless/housing.asp>
- 10** <http://www.va.gov/homeless/housing.asp>
- 11** http://www.research.va.gov/pubs/docs/va_factsheets/Homelessness.pdf ; <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/25023918>
- 12** <http://www.blogs.va.gov/VAntage/16808/counting-every-veteran-on-the-way-to-ending-homelessness/>
- 13** http://articles.orlandosentinel.com/2011-03-13/news/os-homeless-veterans-orlando-20110313_1_homeless-veterans-homeless-shelters-homeless-services-network
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- 16** http://portal.hud.gov/hudportal/HUD?src=/program_offices/comm_planning/veteran_information/mayors_challenge/mayors_and_staff
- 17** Greater Orlando Homeless Programs FACT Sheet, Orlando VAMC
- 18** HUD-VASH Resource Guide for Permanent Housing and Clinical Care; www.va.gov/HOMELESS/docs/Center/144_HUD-VASH_Book-WEB_High_Res_final.pdf
- 19** HUD-VASH Resource Guide for Permanent Housing and Clinical Care; www.va.gov/HOMELESS/docs/Center/144_HUD-VASH_Book-WEB_High_Res_final.pdf
- 20** www.va.gov/homeless/vjo.asp
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- 22** www.va.gov/homeless/dchv.asp
- 23** www.va.gov/homeless/for_homeless_veterans.asp
- 24** Greater Orlando Homeless Programs FACT Sheet, Orlando VAMC
- 25** Rethink Homelessness: A Survey of Best Practices, Communities Making a Difference
- 26** Greater Orlando Homeless Programs FACT Sheet, Orlando VAMC
- 27** Greater Orlando Homeless Programs FACT Sheet, Orlando VAMC



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“As individuals, we sometimes look away when we see a homeless person because the sight is painful. We can no longer do that. Businesses, hospitals, and the community must unite around this issue. We all have a moral obligation to take a stand to end chronic homelessness.”

*–Lars Houmann,
CEO and President,
Florida Hospital*



www.ReThinkHomelessness.org



An initiative of the Central Florida Commission on Homelessness

www.ImpactHomelessness.org

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