

Homeless Veteran Community Employment Service – Field Advisory Mentorship Program

An Innovative Practice in VHA Homeless Program Operations

White Paper

VA



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INTRODUCTION

The VHA National Homeless Programs Office (HPO) identifies and disseminates innovative practices in homeless program operations. Within HPO, the Homeless Veteran Community Employment Service (HVCES) implemented a nationwide Field Advisory Board (FAB) Mentor program that provides peer consultation to new facility-level staff. This practice mitigates challenges associated with staff turnover and provides an increased understanding of the role of homeless program employment staff in increasing housing stability and community integration. Through mentorship, new staff can more quickly adjust to their roles, thereby decreasing interruptions in the development of relationships with community partners and employers as well as the provision of services of Veterans. Similar mentorship programs, implemented at the national, regional, or local levels, may be beneficial to staff in other VHA specialty homeless programs. This may have particular benefit to those programs with a limited number of staff at a given location as well as to homeless program managers across medical centers.

PRACTICE OVERVIEW

Mentor programs across various fields (e.g. nursing, US Armed Forces, mental health practitioners) have demonstrated effects of improving self-efficacy¹, staff retention², job satisfaction^{3,4} and succession planning⁵.

HVCES Community Employment Coordinators (CEC) and Employment Specialists hold unique roles as liaisons in VHA Homeless Programs to both local workforce development systems and external organizations looking to prepare, hire, and retain Veterans for employment. As of May 2020, there are 154 funded CEC positions, 64 Housing and Urban Development-VA Supportive Housing (HUD-VASH) Employment Specialists, and 38 Health Care for Homeless Veterans (HCHV) Employment Specialists across the VHA. Given that there is typically no more than one CEC per medical center/healthcare

¹ Lester, P. B., Hannah, S. T., Harms, P. D., Vogelgesang, G. R., & Avolio, B. J. (2011). Mentoring impact on leader efficacy development: A field experiment. *Academy of Management Learning & Education, 10*(3), 409-429.

² Payne, S. C., & Huffman, A. H. (2005). A longitudinal examination of the influence of mentoring on organizational commitment and turnover. *Academy of Management Journal, 48*:158–168.

³ Collins, P. M. (1994). Does mentorship among social workers make a difference? An empirical investigation of career outcomes. *Social Work, 39*, 413–419.

⁴ Lee, C. D., & del Carmen Montiel, E. (2011). The correlation of mentoring and job satisfaction: A pilot study of mental health professionals. *Community mental health journal, 47*(4), 482-487.

⁵ Jakubik, L. D., Eliades, A. B., Weese, M. M., & Huth, J. J. (2016). Part 1: An overview of mentoring practices and mentoring benefits. *Pediatric nursing, 42*(1), 37-38.



system, and that Employment Specialists are funded at an even smaller number of sites, the opportunity for collaboration or informal mentorship with other VHA vocational specialists can be challenging and inconsistent. Recognizing the benefits that an enterprise-wide peer mentorship model would offer to new employment-focused staff, in October 2015, the FAB Mentor program was launched. Since accepting its first mentee in fiscal year (FY) 2016, the FAB has received 43 requests for peer mentorship with 32 graduating from mentorship (as of May 11, 2020).

HVCES Mentors are located throughout the country in both rural and urban VA settings. After obtaining approval from their supervisors, experienced CECs and Homeless Program Employment Specialists complete a Mentor Interest Form which describes why they are interested in being a mentor, their community setting, and areas of expertise related to the job duties of HVCES staff. Interest Forms are reviewed by the National Director of HVCES for acceptance into the FAB. Potential Mentors must be willing and available to share their most relevant experiences and practices as a CEC or Employment Specialist and participate in mandatory 1-hour consultation calls each quarter with the National Director of HVCES and other mentors. When mentors receive new mentee referrals via email, they are expected to make initial contact within 72 hours to schedule an initial phone meeting.

Similarly, new and existing HVCES staff can request to be paired with a mentor by completing a Mentor Request Form that asks about the potential mentee's catchment area, previous experience with homeless Veterans and employment, their understanding of local resources, and the VHA homeless programs that they are most likely to be working with. Assistance can be provided for a wide range of topics and categories. This may include basic information on the primary responsibilities for HVCES staff; ways to collaborate with VHA homeless program staff, grantees, and other VHA clinical programs within the healthcare system; building and maintaining long-term relationships with employers and

“Mentoring others has really challenged me to stay in touch with how different geographic areas interact with their homeless coalitions, community providers that serve homeless individuals, and services available to each community, as well as how each may supplement VA processes and programs. Being a mentor has helped me grow as a CEC.”

Catherine Phillmon
Community Employment
Coordinator
North Florida / South
Georgia VHS



community agencies; helping Veterans overcome barriers to employment; best practices for job development in rural areas; and planning of job fairs.

Attempts are made to pair a mentor and mentee based on the type of setting and the specific mentee consultation requests that align with a mentor's areas of expertise. In some cases, mentees must be assigned to mentors that do not perfectly match their location and interests based on the availability. Every effort is made not to have more than one or two active mentees assigned to a mentor at any given time given the collateral nature of these duties. In all cases, the National Director for HVCES is available to mentors for guidance and consultation as needed.

The mentors commonly engage new HVCES staff in a variety of ways to orient them to administrative activities incumbent to the CEC or Employment Specialist role and to share pertinent resources and documents. An example of this can be seen in the work of the FAB mentor and CEC for the North Florida / South Georgia Veterans Health System (VHS), who commonly engages in screensharing

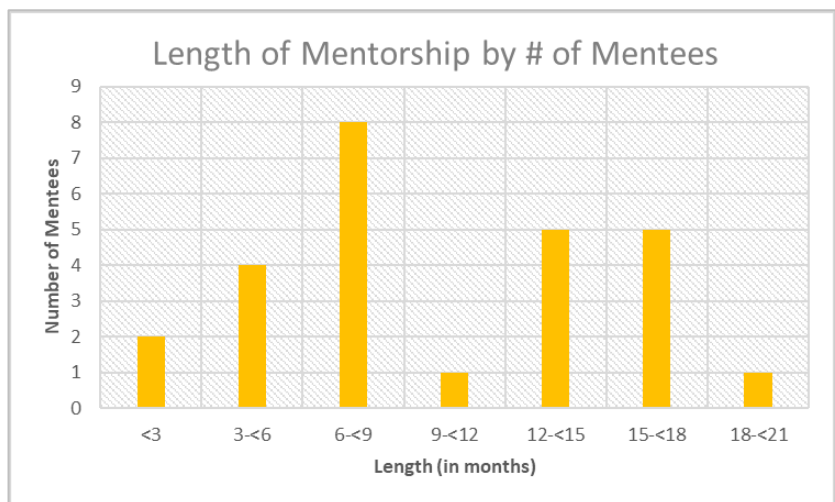


FIGURE 1: LENGTH OF MENTORSHIP BY NUMBER OF MENTEES

via Microsoft Skype to walk her mentees through accessing various VA databases, dashboards, and tracking tools. The mentee can also share their own screen with her so that she can observe and coach as they navigate administrative systems in real time. Additionally, both routine and unscheduled communications via telephone and email serve to supplement the peer-to-peer learning that occurs in the mentor program.

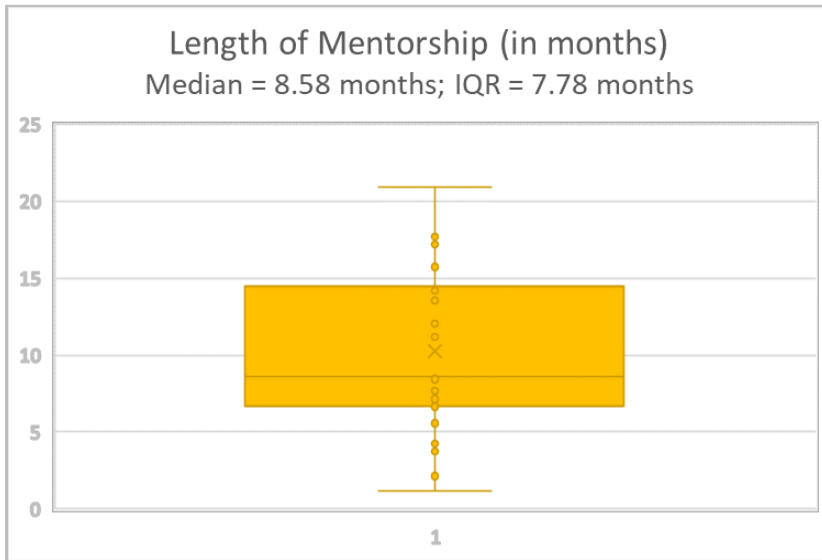


FIGURE 2: LENGTH OF MENTORSHIP (IN MONTHS)

The response to the FAB Mentor program has been overwhelmingly positive. New HVCES Staff who requested mentorship expressed appreciation at the responsiveness and timeliness of mentors to inquiries made, report warm feelings of camaraderie and connectedness to their colleagues and the mission, and report increased feelings of being “on the right track”.

CONCLUSION

Leaders at national, regional, and local levels should strongly consider establishing FAB mentor programs. Given frequent staff turnover and changes in leadership across homeless programs, a peer-driven mentorship system can mitigate the lack of local culture carriers and potential absence of team members with specific experiences related to the roles at hand, function as a supplemental resource for staff to develop within their roles and increase job satisfaction among mentors. This can apply to HCHV and HUD-VASH managers in addition to frontline case management staff.

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For more information about this practice, please contact Carma Heitzmann, Ph.D., National Director for HVCES at Carma.Heitzmann@va.gov.

