

Captain James A. Lovell FHCC – Domiciliary Care for Homeless Veterans’ Employment Preparation Classes

An Innovative Practice in VHA Homeless Program Operations

White Paper

VA



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INTRODUCTION

The VHA Homeless Program Office identifies and disseminates innovative practices in homeless program operations. The Captain James A. Lovell Federal Health Care Center (FHCC) in North Chicago, IL has been recognized as a site with an innovative practice for their Domiciliary Care for Homeless Veterans (DCHV) program's job preparedness curriculum.

PRACTICE OVERVIEW

Employment preparation classes, developed collaboratively with community partners and utilizing a structured curriculum, are effective in helping Veterans exit VA homeless residential programs with gainful employment.

As programs across VA recognize the critical importance of employment in long-term housing stability for Veterans who have experienced homelessness, effective coordination of employment resources available in each community can be challenging. This was the case at the Lovell FHCC's DCHV program where employment focused groups were facilitated not only by the homeless program's Community Employment Coordinator (CEC), but also community partners including Transitional Living Services (TLS), Catholic Charities, the Illinois Department of Employment Services (IDES), Disabled Veterans Outreach Program (DVOP), and Local Veterans Employment Representatives (LVERs). While these groups had shared goals, the format, expectations, and access points were inconsistent. Noting the opportunity for collaboration amongst the different employment providers, in January 2018, IDES's DVOP proposed developing a seven-week job preparation curriculum that would systematically and consistently prepare Veterans residing at the DCHV program with the tools they needed to exit with gainful employment. What emerged was the Employment Readiness¹ Workshop (ERW).

Facilitated jointly by the CEC, TLS, Catholic Charities, and the IDES LVER and DVOP, ERW classes took place Thursday afternoons at the James A. Lovell FHCC. Each week featured one of seven classes designed to effectively prepare a cohort of 15 to 20 Veterans for employment. The first week introduced the course, with ERW facilitators outlining expectations and Veterans completing intake forms with the partner agencies. This step was important as the Veterans needed to be enrolled with

¹ Please note the use of the term "job readiness" is not intended to suggest that there are any specific Veteran requirements for participation in these groups other than a desire to return to employment and a willingness to participate in developing a plan for employment.



the partner agencies to access resources such as bus passes, gas cards, and clothing for interviews. Veterans also completed assessments to identify their desired jobs and relevant skills. The second week focused on basic resume writing skills while the third week taught Veterans how to effectively search for jobs and submit online applications. The fourth week expanded upon the basic resume skills with “resume tailoring” – customizing generic resumes to meet the requirements for specific jobs. The fifth week offered Veterans lessons on interview and soft skills such as hand shaking, eye contact, punctuality, and interpersonal skills needed for job retention.

As Veterans entered the sixth week, they practiced their skills with mock interviews conducted by human resources (HR) specialists and hiring managers from the private sector. These guest interviewers evaluated each Veteran and provided concrete and actionable feedback. Additionally, Veterans dressed in business attire to help them feel comfortable and familiar with an interview setting. To ensure privacy for the non-participating DCHV residents, these sessions took place off site. When Veterans reached the seventh and final week, they met with potential employers, identified through existing relationships of the various community partners, for real job interviews. Once again, this occurred off site to ensure privacy. Even after completing all seven classes, Veterans sometimes presented with additional barriers to employment. Solutions were developed on an individual basis. For example, if Veterans had legal issues, volunteer attorneys from Prairie State Legal Services visited the DCHV program as part of ERW to address these issues. Also, HR specialists were brought in to speak about federal hiring at the James A. Lovell FHCC, how to apply for Direct Hire, and how to apply using USAJobs.com.

“Nationally, we encourage programs to help Veterans work on their employment goals early. Don’t wait until the Veteran is ready to leave. Instead, start planning for employment right at program entry. If you can engage them right at the start, the Veterans will have much greater success in obtaining work.”

Carma Heitzmann, Ph.D.
**National Director, Homeless
Veteran Community
Employment Services,
VHA Homeless Program
Office**

Starting in June 2018, DCHV Veterans were granted access to the Lovell Vocational Rehabilitation Unit’s computer lab, allowing the ERW facilitators to provide hands-on demonstrations of resume development and job searches. Having access to an on-campus computer lab significantly improved access to employment resources as it was often logistically cumbersome to transport Veterans to the nearest job center.



The CEC noted that it would often take time and persistence to engage Veterans in ERW. Motivational strategies were helpful with assisting Veterans with completing the curriculum. Although participation was initially voluntary, for Veterans who had employment goals on their treatment plan, attendance at the ERW became a program requirement. To further encourage attendance, the ERW facilitators added a make-up day on Wednesdays so that Veterans who missed a course could still receive that week's information without falling behind. Adding the make-up session significantly improved overall attendance, highlighting that barriers to attendance were often logistical rather than motivational. This collaboration has been highly successful for both Veterans and community partners as it benefited Veterans accessing resources and obtaining employment while helping agencies meet their deliverables with no duplication of services. **During FY 2018, 53.66 percent of Veterans exiting DCHV did so with full or part-time employment, greatly exceeding the performance target of 35 percent.**

CONCLUSION

As evidenced by the DCHV program at the Captain James A. Lovell FHCC and their partners, effective coordination of employment resources has been momentarily beneficial to Veterans exiting residential programs to permanent housing, helping to ensure their financial and housing stability.

We would like to thank the dedicated staff at the Captain James A. Lovell FHCC for sharing their practice with us. For more information, please contact Jennifer Olden, LCSW, Supervisory Social Worker at Jennifer.Olden@va.gov, or John Wicinski, Community Employment Coordinator at John.Wicinski@va.gov.

