VISN 6 – Ending Veteran Homelessness in the Commonwealth of Virginia

A Collection of Innovative Practices in VHA Homeless Program Operations

White Paper

INTRODUCTION

The VHA Homeless Program Office identifies and disseminates innovative practices in homeless program operations. Veterans Integrated Service Network (VISN) 6, in collaboration with its affiliated VA Medical Centers (VAMCs) and community partners, has been recognized for their innovative practices in ending Veteran homelessness in the Commonwealth of Virginia.

PRACTICE OVERVIEW

Strong leaders that effectively leverage statewide resources, while empowering local action, are effective in ending Veteran homelessness statewide.

As one of the first states to declare an end to Veteran homelessness, Virginia's homeless service systems offer many important insights. With 16 homeless Continuums of Care (CoCs) and three VAMCs, coordination across 43,000 square miles took creativity, determination, and strong leadership. Overseeing the effort was the Director of Housing Development (HD) at the Virginia Department of Veterans Services. This role had the 10,000-foot view, monitoring Virginia's major homeless service operations and leveraging the Governor's Coordinating Council on Homelessness to drive system improvements. Members of the Coordinating Council included the VISN 6 Network Homeless Coordinator (NHC), regional representatives from the Departments of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and Labor, the Virginia Departments of Motor Vehicles (DMV), Corrections, Behavioral Health, and Social Services. The Director of HD recognized the importance of bi-directional communication: understanding local needs for visibility at the state level while disseminating statewide strategies and assistance back down to the local level. Consequently, he prioritized communicating directly with outreach workers and community leaders to feed critical "on the ground" information back to the Council. With his history working for homeless CoCs and his solution-focused work ethic, the Director was effective at ensuring that different systems at varying levels understood each other.

Though efforts to end Veteran homelessness were already underway across Virginia, statewide progress accelerated during the Summer of 2014 when the Governor signed up for the Mayor's Challenge to End Veteran's Homelessness – a national call to action for all mayors and other state and local leaders. This brought to bear many vital state resources and paved the way for a statewide 100-Day Rapid Results Boot Camp for Virginia's largest CoCs. Facilitated in September 2014 by technical assistance providers Community Solutions and the Rapid Results Institute, the 100-day boot camp focused on helping the five largest CoCs establish strong foundations for local coordinated entry systems and gave the various providers and VAMCs shared language and tools that all communities across Virginia could adopt. Federal representatives from the United States Interagency Council on

Homelessness (USICH), HUD, and VA also came down to provide knowledge and help overcome barriers.

An early challenge goal was to establish a statewide by-name-list (BNL), a registry of currently known homeless Veterans in Virginia. Figuring out how to share the needed data was straightforward and surprisingly simple. A key philosophy was that data sharing must be purpose driven – as a means to an end, not as an end itself. They developed regional releases of information that complied with VA privacy policies and quickly adopted a statewide common assessment tool to prioritize Veterans in a consistent and uniform way.

While it was important to have statewide data reporting and information sharing, it was clear that a statewide coordinated entry system would not be feasible. There were too many variables, systems, policies, and local issues to work through. Instead, the day-to-day activities of coordinated entry happened locally. Each CoC built and managed their own BNL, whose information was merged at the regional and VAMC levels, and then finally rolled up into a statewide view. The Richmond based non-profit, Homeward, was a key partner in managing the statewide BNL and preparing the data needed to certify achieving the goal of ending Veteran homelessness through USICH's Federal Criteria & Benchmarks.

> *"If we didn't do this as a statewide initiative, many of our cities would have had a harder time. When one city had a challenge, other cities could help them out. Either they had a solution or they shared motivation and encouragement. It helped them move forward."*
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> **Jeffrey Doyle**
> **Network Homeless Coordinator**
> **VISN 6**

The Director of HD worked closely with the VISN 6 NHC to keep the local VAMCs focused while helping to resolve issues with community partners as they arose. It did not take long for all three VA homeless programs to be fully on board, dedicating residential treatment and permanent housing resources to the communities' efforts. Due to overlaps between the VAMC and CoC catchment areas, it became clear that housing resources like HUD-VA Supportive Housing (HUD-VASH) needed to be managed regionally. Over the course of a year, VA and community partners worked with experts at HUD headquarters to develop memoranda of understanding for seven different public housing authorities that allowed for streamlined portability in one of Virginia's service regions.

The Director of HD, the VISN 6 NHC, and the community partners realized that working regionally and empowering regional leaders to act not only untangled complicated housing processes, but also led to greater understanding of how Veterans migrate throughout Virginia. Additionally, when community partners like Homeward cross-matched BNLs from different regions, they also learned how Veterans

self-resolved their housing crises. This allowed them to focus efforts on Veterans who were stagnant on their lists and realize that, while it was not possible to serve everyone, the system did not have to.

Following the boot camp, the Coordinating Council relied on strong partners who understood cross-sector work to keep the momentum going. The Director of HD leveraged the progress of the original boot camp communities to establish similar community-wide teams in other CoCs across the state. A statewide community of practice was established and nurtured to both encourage and help communities build effective and interconnected systems. Additionally, through collaboration with the Virginia DMV, the Director was successful in approving the use of HMIS data as evidence of residency for the issuance of replacement identification cards. The Director also was successful in utilizing state foundation dollars to address potential housing crises for Veterans who were being housed in HUD-VASH at increasingly faster rates. The foundation disbursed money out to Veterans quicker than usual by providing monthly reimbursements to local nonprofits that already had competency in providing financial assistance, instead of disbursing it themselves. At one point, one of the major power companies donated 2.5 million dollars for a utility assistance energy share fund that was distributed through existing Supportive Services for Veteran Families (SSVF) grantees.

In November 2015, the Commonwealth of Virginia publicly declared a statewide end to Veteran homelessness. Though proud, the community feared that engagement would drop following their announcement. In response, the Director of HD and other leaders developed messaging to clearly articulate that ending Veteran homelessness was about creating strong, lasting systems ensuring that homelessness was rare, brief, and non-reoccurring. In the years that followed, this messaging proved more effective than anticipated, helping contextualize homelessness and the range of Veteran needs to the public while reinforcing the engagement of homeless service providers statewide.

CONCLUSION

Ending homelessness statewide is a monumental accomplishment made possible by having leaders, like the Director of HD, who could leverage the full range of statewide resources and build sustainable, high performing systems that kept the mission going strong. We would like to thank the dedicated staff at the VAMCs and State and community agencies across VISN 6 for sharing their practices with us. If you have questions about these practices, please contact Jeffrey Doyle, VISN 6 Network Homeless Coordinator, at Jeffrey.Doyle@va.gov; Matthew Leslie, Director of Housing Development, Virginia Department of Veterans Services, at Matthew.Leslie@dvs.virginia.gov; or Kelly King Horne, Director, Homeward VA at KKHorne@homewardva.org.