

# VHA Homeless Programs Office

Working Together to Help Veterans Exit Homelessness

AUGUST 2020

## Message from Monica Diaz, Executive Director, VHA-National Homeless Programs Office



As COVID-19 continues to spread across the United States, the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) is pressing-on with its ongoing and aggressive public health actions to protect and care for Veterans during this urgent national crisis. This vital work includes outreach to and care coordination for Veterans who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. In addition to being at increased risk of contracting COVID-19 due to poor living conditions, this subpopulation of Veterans is also at higher risk of unfavorable outcomes if they become infected because of the prevalence of chronic health problems and advanced age among the group.

To address the urgent needs of this vulnerable subpopulation during the COVID-19 pandemic, the Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security (CARES) Act allocated \$17.2 billion for the Veterans Health Administration (VHA), of which \$700 million is devoted to expanding services for and addressing challenges faced by Veterans who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. This funding enhances VA's ability to provide homeless prevention and rapid rehousing services to Veterans under the Supportive Services for Veteran Families (SSVF) Program. It also expands VA's ability under the Health Care for Homeless Veterans (HCHV) Program to provide emergency shelter to Veterans who need to self-isolate to prevent spreading or contracting COVID-19. The funding also enables the Grant and Per Diem (GPD) Program to waive per diem limits during the crisis to help GPD grantees provide needed emergency housing and supportive services, including emergency placement for Veterans who need to be isolated for their safety or the safety of others. VA cannot do this vital work alone. In addition to the expanded services, and through collaborations with organizations such as America's Adopt A Soldier, VA is also helping homeless and at-risk Veterans stay connected to their health care providers and loved ones during the pandemic using donated laptop computers and mobile phones.

Healthcare equity is at the center of VA's work serving Veterans. COVID-19 has amplified the structural inequalities that exist within America, including disparate health care access and outcomes. [According to the CDC](#), "Long-standing systemic health and social inequities have put many people from racial and ethnic minority groups at increased risk of getting sick and dying from COVID-19." For example, black Americans are [twice as likely](#) to die from COVID-19 as white, non-Hispanic, Americans. Every American institution has a role to play in rooting-out structural inequality.

For our part, the VHA Homeless Programs Office (HPO) is committed to understanding and addressing racial bias in the delivery of care to the Veterans we serve to ensure we achieve the best possible outcomes for everyone who wore the uniform. To that end, we recently formed the HPO Racial Equity Workgroup. The group has three focus areas:

- 1. Organization:** Conduct a comprehensive organizational assessment to determine areas for organizational improvement and growth. Update organizational structure and operations to have racial equity as a core component and create a more inclusive workplace where employees feel safe to share concerns.
- 2. Veterans:** Develop training for employees and Veterans, which addresses implicit bias, systemic racism, identity, and psychological safety.
- 3. Field staff:** Assess current reporting processes and communication procedures when discrimination concerns are raised and revise the processes, if necessary.

## Program updates



Tim McGill, U.S. Army Veteran

### Veteran uses telehealth to stick with treatment during the pandemic

The transition from military to civilian life wasn't as easy as Tim McGill had anticipated when he left the U.S. Army in 2008 after four years of service. He felt detached and angry, and eventually turned to alcohol and drugs in an attempt to find relief, which led to encounters with the criminal justice system. By the spring of 2019, McGill's future was looking bleak. But after talking to a friend and fellow Veteran, he decided to ask for help from the [Butler VA Health Care System](#) in Butler, Pennsylvania. As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Butler VA HCS suspended on-site operations indefinitely. Working with the Butler VA HCS and VJO staff, Kelly Fulmer, a [Veterans Justice Outreach \(VJO\)](#) specialist, was able to obtain donated iPads to distribute to McGill and other Veterans in MRT who wouldn't have access otherwise. Once McGill learned how to use the iPad, he was able to resume face-to-face communication with Fulmer, his therapist, and other Veterans. [Read the full story.](#)

### VA to award more than 425 grants, \$279 million to help prevent and end Veteran homelessness

On Wednesday August 19, 2020, the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) announced that it will award more than 425 grants to community organizations totaling approximately \$279 million under the [Grant Per Diem \(GPD\) program](#). The GPD program provides funding to community organizations that provide transitional housing and supportive services for homeless Veterans, with the goal of helping homeless Veterans achieve residential stability, increase their skill levels and income and obtain greater self-determination. [Read the full news release.](#)

### VA to award more than \$400 million in grants to end Veteran homelessness

On Friday August 7, 2020, the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) announced that it will begin awarding more than \$400 million in grants under the [Supportive Services for Veteran Families Program](#) (SSVF) to 266 non-profit organizations in all 50 states, the District of Columbia, Guam, Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands on October 1 of this year. [Read the full news release.](#)

## Upcoming Events



*"In response to these challenging times, the Veterans Health Administration Homeless Programs Office (HPO) has taken swift action to ensure that we are prioritizing Veterans' COVID-19 related housing needs while always promoting racial equity in our work." - Monica Diaz, Executive Director, VHA-National Homeless Programs Office*

### Stand Downs

Stand Downs are typically one- to three-day events during which VA staff and volunteers provide food, clothing and health screenings to Veterans who are homeless or at-risk of homelessness. [Due to COVID-19, be sure to check with your local VAMC or Stand Down POCs for information and guidance on health and safety precautions.](#)

Below are September Stand Downs through September 11, 2020. To find additional upcoming Stand Downs in your community, visit the [upcoming events website](#).

- September 5, 2020 - Tacoma, WA
- September 11, 2020 - Asheville, NC
- September 11, 2020 - Boston, MA
- September 11, 2020 - Minneapolis, MN
- September 11, 2020 - Portsmouth, OH
- September 11, 2020 - Welch, WV

New events are added regularly. For more information, including Stand Down POCs, or to participate, check [this page](#) often for updates.

### Regional Amazon virtual job fair on September 17

The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (Homeless Veterans Community Employment Services) and CareerSource Escarosa will be hosting a regional Amazon virtual job fair on September 17 to connect Veteran job seekers with employment opportunities.

The job fair will focus on filling hourly entry-level positions at Amazon warehouses, delivery stations, and Whole Food stores (in certain areas) at the following locations:

- Long Beach, MS (Biloxi)
- Theodore, AL (Mobile)
- Pensacola, FL
- New Orleans, LA
- Baton Rouge, LA
- Bessemer (Birmingham), AL
- Lucedale (Hattiesburg), MS
- Possible rural delivery stations

[Register for this event](#) or Veterans can apply online at [amazon.com/militaryjobs](#) or text **MILITARY** to **77088** for job alerts.

## HPO Fact of the Month

### Did you know?

The [Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security \(CARES\) Act](#) has expanded resources to address the unique challenges faced by Veterans and their families who are experiencing or at risk of homelessness during the COVID-19 pandemic. The CARES Act allocated \$17.2 billion for the Veterans Health Administration, including \$700 million devoted to assisting low-income Veteran families.

Visit the VA Homeless [COVID-19 resource page](#) for more information on VA assistance for Veterans and their families who are facing homelessness during the COVID-19 pandemic.

## Communicate with Us

We value your feedback about the work underway to prevent and end homelessness among Veterans. Please share your comments by clicking the blue "Contact Homeless Outreach" button on the [VHA Homeless Programs website](#).