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Introduction

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As we plan for the future of the Homeless Programs Office (HPO) of the Veterans Health Administration (VHA), I am grateful to have the opportunity to serve the Nation’s Veterans in a capacity that promotes a holistic approach to restoring and maintaining their health. My office is dedicated to finding solutions that increase access to permanent housing, and offering programs and services that provide a sense of dignity, belonging, personal empowerment, and independence. I have made it my mission to ensure that HPO can meet the changing needs of Veterans experiencing homelessness.

HPO has evolved since its inception in 1987. Our most recent shift happened at the end of 2022 when the Joseph Maxwell Cleland and Robert Joseph Dole Memorial Veterans Benefits and Health Care Improvement Act Of 2022 (Cleland Dole Act) was signed into law under the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2023 (P.L. 117-328). The law, based on more than 30 bills on Veteran issues, addresses health care, benefits, and homelessness, among other topics. Thanks to the Cleland Dole Act, HPO will have new and enhanced programs for homeless Veterans that align with VA’s commitment to preventing and ending Veteran homelessness.

The 2023 Housing and Urban Development (HUD) annual Point-in-Time Count highlighted the significant challenges to housing stability that Veterans face. The data show that on a single night in January 2023, there were 35,574 Veterans who experienced homelessness in the U.S. — that’s a 7.4% increase in the number of Veterans experiencing homelessness from 2022. Despite this increase, there is still an overall downward trend in Veteran homelessness. The estimated number of Veterans experiencing homelessness in the U.S. has declined by 52.0% since 2010. Within the last three years alone, there has been an approximately 4% overall reduction in Veteran homelessness.

The rise in homelessness among Veterans and non-Veterans in many communities across the U.S. shows that homelessness is a policy choice. During the height of the COVID pandemic, the country collectively chose to invest more in housing, support, and systems that prevent people from losing homes in the first place. The American Rescue Plan and other emergency pandemic resources — many of which have expired — prevented the rise in homelessness that we are now seeing. Preventing and ending homelessness requires a comprehensive approach that acknowledges it is the failure of multiple systems — not people. It also addresses the crises of housing and health care, including mental health and substance use, and the influx of asylum seekers.
Our network of partnerships, the implementation of evidence-based Housing First approaches, the establishment of innovative initiatives, and VA staff’s relentless dedication and hard work have contributed to this reduction. To help accelerate progress, VA announced new goals for the calendar year 2023, which include an ambitious housing goal and other milestones that focus on preventing and resolving returns to homelessness and improving engagement with unsheltered Veterans.

The HPO strategic plan aligns with the Biden-Harris administration’s current priorities and incorporates key lessons learned from our ongoing efforts to serve Veterans. As you read through the objectives and strategies outlined in the updated plan, consider what steps you can take to help us achieve our goals. We cannot end Veteran homelessness alone; support from our community partners and stakeholders is critical. Together, we are committed to refining and purposing our objectives and strategies to take advantage of this once-in-a-generation opportunity to ensure every Veteran has a safe and stable place to call home.

I invite you to join us on this journey. Together, we can end Veteran homelessness.

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CONTRIBUTORS AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

HPO would like to acknowledge the following groups and organizations whose contributions were vital to the initial and ongoing development of this strategic planning document:

- **Homeless Programs Office Staff.** Staff from HPO’s various sections and programs provided information and insight.

- **VA Stakeholders.** Countless VHA Network Homeless Coordinators and other VA and VHA leadership participants helped create content.

- **Strategic Decision and Coordination Team (SDCT).** SDCT is a collaborative decision-making body representing the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), and the U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness (USICH). Together, these agencies execute activities necessary to prevent and end Veteran homelessness. Additionally, *USICH’s All In: The Federal Strategic Plan to Prevent and End Veteran Homelessness has been instrumental in informing updates to our strategic plan.*

- **Advisory Committee on Homeless Veterans (ACHV).** ACHV operates under the provisions of the Federal Advisory Committee Act. ACHV advises and makes recommendations to the Secretary of VA and Congress on benefits and services provided to Veterans experiencing homelessness and other issues affecting this population.

- **National Alliance to End Homelessness (NAEH).** NAEH is a nonprofit organization whose sole purpose is to end homelessness in the United States. NAEH uses research and data to find solutions to homelessness, works with federal and local partners to create a solid base of policy and resources that support those solutions, and helps communities implement them.

- **Community Solutions.** Community Solutions is a nonprofit that leads Built for Zero, a movement of more than 80 cities and counties to use data to radically change how they work, achieve impact, and prove it is possible to make homelessness rare and brief. To propel this movement to end homelessness, partners work with communities to solve the most persistent challenges that stand in the way.

- **National Coalition on Homeless Veterans (NCHV).** NCHV is a nonprofit organization that serves as a resource and technical assistance center for a national network of community-based service providers and local, state, and federal agencies that provide emergency and supportive housing, food, health services, job training, placement assistance, legal aid, and case management for Veterans experiencing homelessness.

- **University of California, San Francisco’s Benioff Homelessness and Housing Initiative.** Their “Toward a New Understanding: The California Statewide Study of People Experiencing Homelessness” has been helpful in informing updates to our strategic plans.
Each Veteran is our collective responsibility.

Section 1: Mission, Vision, Values

MISSION STATEMENT
We ensure that Veterans and their families obtain permanent and sustainable housing with access to supportive services that are Veteran-centered, equitable, and lead to personal empowerment.

VISION STATEMENT
We work toward ending homelessness for all Veterans and their families using evidence-based, innovative practices and partnerships to provide access to permanent housing and deliver Veteran-centered, equitable, and inclusive services leading to personal empowerment and increased independence.
HOMELESS PROGRAMS OFFICE (HPO) CORE VALUES

HPO’s core values — **H.P. O. C.A.R.E.S** — embrace VA’s I-CARE values and are embodied in everything we do in pursuit of our mission.

**HOME:** We believe that ending homelessness starts by applying **Housing First principles** and supportive services responsive to the needs of each Veteran and their family.

**PARTNERSHIPS:** We **engage in meaningful federal, state, and local partnerships** that enhance access to care and improve service coordination.

**OWNERSHIP:** We practice **integrity** through each one of our actions, and we do what we say we will do.

**COMMITMENT:** We commit to **Housing First approaches and eliminating barriers** to housing.

**ADVOCACY:** We advocate for **immediate and long-term solutions** that challenge the status quo and correct policies that create racial disparities in homelessness.

**RESPECT:** We **respect the right to self-determination** among Veterans and their families by demonstrating a high regard for their values, preferences, and needs.

**EXCELLENCE:** We achieve excellence by understanding that **each Veteran is our collective responsibility** and by applying a One Team approach toward the common mission.

**SERVICE:** We provide exceptional **mission-driven customer service** to all we interact with, including Veterans and their families, stakeholders, community partners, colleagues, and staff.
Until no Veteran experiences the tragedy and indignity of homelessness — and every Veteran has a safe, stable, accessible, and affordable home.

Section 2: HPO’s Pillars

HPO’s practices, programs, and services are centered on three pillars: outreach, housing solutions, and supportive services. Each pillar has three key foundations: equity, data and research, and community partnerships.

These pillars are foundational to the many homeless programs and services HPO has established over the years to meet the needs of homeless Veterans and their families. HPO programs that fall under these pillars are described in the following section. Details regarding these programs can be found in the HPO Fact Sheet.
Section 3: Goals, Objectives, and Strategies

HOMELESS PROGRAMS OFFICE GOALS

As part of its Agency Priority Goals, VA will place at least 76,000 unique Veterans into permanent housing and ensure that at least 90% of Veterans at risk of homelessness are prevented from becoming homeless by September 30, 2025.

Ending Veteran homelessness depends on not only resolving episodes of homelessness, but also preventing new episodes of homelessness from occurring.

Ultimately, success in achieving these goals will be reflected in continued declines in the number of sheltered and unsheltered homeless Veterans as reported by the U.S. Department for Housing and Urban Development’s (HUD) Point-in-Time count (and other required supports), as well as an increase in the number of Veterans that have been prevented from experiencing homelessness.
To achieve this goal, VA is focusing on two strategic areas:

- **Permanent housing placements.** VA has the ability to increase access to affordable housing by leveraging the resources and expertise of federal, state, and local organizations, including landlords, and advocating for policies that promote flexibilities in current programs and new housing development. VA will recruit and retain landlords willing to provide Veteran housing and collaborate with HUD to identify barriers and policy changes needed to utilize existing housing options more effectively.

- **Prevent initial or recurring homelessness.** VA can prevent episodes of homelessness by identifying at-risk Veterans and providing timely interventions such as diversion and rental assistance. VA will leverage flexibilities to provide shallow rent subsidies to Veterans at risk of homelessness and promote diversion strategies to prevent Veterans from entering the homeless crisis response system.

Additionally, HPO is deploying its One Team\(^1\) Approach through strategic partnerships and strengthened collaborations with internal VA and external partners.

### HPO OBJECTIVES AND STRATEGIES

To achieve VA’s goals to end and prevent Veteran homelessness, the following seven objectives have been identified as key to propelling HPO’s vision and mission forward. These objectives and strategies will be reassessed annually and updated as appropriate.

#### OBJECTIVE 1: Increase access to affordable permanent housing options.

Strategies to achieve the objective:

1. **Enhance integration between the Housing and Urban Development-VA Supportive Housing (HUD-VASH) and Supportive Services for Veteran Families (SSVF) programs to increase voucher use and accelerate housing placements.**

2. **Promote effective interagency policy developments and implementations that increase rental housing affordability and alleviate the cost burden for homeless Veterans and their families.**
   - 2.1 **Develop and implement strategies that support Veterans whose incomes exceed limits for program participation but who still need supportive services to resolve their homelessness.**

3. **Promote and advance the availability of affordable housing for HUD-VASH project-based voucher development and targeted availability or rental subsidies.**

4. **Ensure that all VA homeless programs provide a coordinated response that prioritizes permanent housing placements using Housing First principles.**

5. **Increase the use of housing navigation services.**

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1. HPO’s One Team integrative approach refers to coordinated, united actions among programs toward a joint mission. The principles of breaking down silos and encouraging cross-skilled work yield demonstrable benefits in the quality and speed of service delivery for Veterans.
SECTION 3: HPO OBJECTIVES AND STRATEGIES

OBJECTIVE 2: Expand targeted prevention services and resolve returns to homelessness.

Strategies to achieve the objective:

2.1 Increase Veterans’ access to legal services, including eviction prevention and landlord mediation, through legal services grants and community partnerships.

2.2 Enhance income and financial stability through evidence-based employment supports (e.g., training, transportation) and affirmative outreach to support increasing receipt of benefits.

2.3 Leverage and apply national flexibilities through the SSVF Shallow Subsidy services to meet the needs of extremely low-income Veterans and their households.

2.4 Apply a One Team integrative approach toward delivering homeless programs and services that provide an agile and comprehensive response to prevent and resolve Veteran homelessness.

2.5 Lead initiatives and efforts in partnership with law enforcement, prisons, jails, and other VA stakeholders to reduce the risk of returns to homelessness for justice-involved Veterans.

OBJECTIVE 3: Enhance targeted services to address the needs of vulnerable and underserved populations.

Strategies to achieve the objective:

3.1 Optimize and increase coordinated outreach and service delivery focused on identifying and engaging homeless Veterans in unsheltered settings.

3.2 Provide immediate access to interim housing and supportive services through the elimination of unnecessary barriers and by using Housing First principles that do not impose preconditions for immediate access to permanent housing.

3.2 A Enhance residential homeless programs to increase access and decrease barriers for women, transgender, gender non-conforming, justice-involved, rural, and aging Veterans and other vulnerable populations.

3.2 B Eliminate administrative burdens and lower barriers to immediate access to housing.

3.3 Facilitate the full integration of VA resources into the local coordinated entry system (CES) to provide an agile homeless response in collaboration with community stakeholders.

3.4 Support effective housing and supportive services prioritization through community by-name lists and data sharing.

3.5 Conduct targeted local housing surge events to facilitate immediate enrollment into homeless programs, streamline access to interim housing, and accelerate permanent housing placements for Veterans.
3.6 Increase access to housing programs and services for American Indians and Alaska Natives through enhanced engagement and technical assistance.

3.7 Increase coordination and integration to develop approaches to address the service and housing needs of aging Veterans, those at risk of suicide, and Veterans with substance use disorder and behavioral health needs.

**OBJECTIVE 4: Use research and data to make informed and timely decisions.**

Strategies to achieve the objective:

4.1 Develop, modernize, and sustain tools that provide the necessary insights to make data-driven decisions that positively impact Veterans' outcomes and improve program performance.

4.2 Incorporate research and data insights into homeless program operations by providing training, education, and tools to homeless program staff so they can effectively utilize data internally and with community partners.

4.3 Promote research and evaluation that provides a comprehensive understanding of homeless programs and the Veterans served and enables the identification and rapid implementation of evidence-based strategies to end Veteran homelessness.

**OBJECTIVE 5: Provide equitable services and outcomes through all homeless programs and services.**

Strategies to achieve the objective:

5.1 Embed equity principles in all aspects of homeless system service delivery.

5.1 A Conduct targeted analyses of regions facing a disproportionate number of Veterans from racial and ethnic minority groups who return to homelessness.

5.1 B Ensure that prevention efforts and coordinated entry prioritization address identified inequities.

5.2 Combat the stigmatization of justice-involved Veterans, including stigmatization based on multi-group identities (including but not limited to race, gender identity, sexual identity, socioeconomic status, and legal history).

5.3 Conduct targeted analyses of regions facing a disproportionate number of Veterans from racial and ethnic minority groups who return to homelessness.
OBJECTIVE 6: Provide national technical assistance for strategic actions.

Strategies to achieve the objective:

6.1 Provide remote and on-site technical assistance and training to VA medical center homeless programs and grantees.

   6.1 A Provide training, technical assistance, and resources that encourage promising practices related to effective outreach, preventing and resolving returns to homelessness, and accelerating permanent housing placements.

6.2 Coordinate and provide technical assistance among interagency partners toward ending Veteran homelessness.

OBJECTIVE 7: Ensure adequate homeless programs staffing resources and support the development of a highly skilled workforce.

Strategies to achieve the objective:

7.1 Implement a national staffing strategy that applies innovative approaches to accelerate adequate nationwide staffing and address the safety and well-being of all community-based VA staff.

7.2 Provide and prioritize education and technical training skills in alignment with Housing First principles and strategies.

7.3 Identify and address the causes of burnout among staff working in homeless programs.

7.4 Develop strategies that support the appropriate staffing resources to conduct outreach and provide case management to meet the needs of the population.
Providing mission-driven customer service to support America’s Veterans.