

Jesse Brown VAMC – Landlord Engagement Strategies

An Innovative Practice in VHA Homeless Program Operations

White Paper

VA



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of Veterans Affairs**

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INTRODUCTION

The VHA Homeless Program Office identifies and disseminates innovative practices in homeless program operations. The Jesse Brown VA Medical Center (VAMC) has been identified as a site with an innovative practice for their comprehensive landlord engagement activities.

PRACTICE OVERVIEW

Comprehensive and sustained landlord engagement activities are effective in securing housing units for homeless Veterans.

Operating Plans completed by homeless program leads across VA frequently indicate that “lack of affordable housing” is one of the most significant barriers to program operations. Homeless programs are constantly challenged to develop innovative ways to engage landlords and identify new housing stock for Veterans experiencing homelessness. In the late Summer and early Fall of 2017, the National Housing and Urban Development-VA Supportive Housing (HUD-VASH) Program Office partnered with staff at the Jesse Brown VAMC to develop and test effective landlord engagement strategies that would enhance accessibility and affordability of housing in Chicago's highest need areas. Specifically, Jesse Brown's HUD-VASH Team Leader engaged in a time-limited project focused on improving access to affordable housing in Chicago.

At the start, the HUD-VASH Team Leader worked with the Landlord Engagement Coordinator from Chicago's Ending Veteran Homeless Initiative to convene a Landlord Engagement Committee. This committee, staffed by the Team Leader, the Coordinator, and additional VA HUD-VASH clinicians, met weekly to develop and implement various engagement strategies. While the Homeless Program Office previously published a white paper on the San Diego VAMC's landlord engagement strategies (<http://vhaindwebsim.v11.med.va.gov/hub2/app/hp/library/record/visit?id=948>), strategies for this project included researching the current housing market and identifying preexisting engagement efforts, networking to the major Veterans and housing advocacy groups, canvassing neighborhoods to familiarize themselves with the community and identify possible landlord contacts, hosting small-scale landlord “coffee talks”, and organizing a large-scale landlord engagement event.

Before landlord recruitment activities began, the committee conducted an initial assessment to identify the kinds of engagement activities or strategies already taking place. They connected with providers such as housing counseling agencies certified by the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), housing specialists, and the Chicago Housing Authority (CHA). From this assessment, they identified several organizations that could help support their efforts. The Notre Dame Club of Chicago's

Veterans Initiative Committee helped facilitate meetings with Aldermen, elected representatives from the various legislative districts in Chicago, and committed to assist with marketing for future events. Also, the Spanish Coalition for Housing (SCH) agreed to allow the committee access to their Chicago Bilingual Landlord Association meetings and networking contacts. To supplement the high-level networking, the committee also canvassed neighborhoods and met directly with landlords and property owners who maintained apartments that were in high demand but low supply. In addition, the Landlord Engagement Committee received support from CHA through invitations to host a booth at the CHA Owner Symposium event and through the inclusion of HUD-VASH landlord recruitment flyers in their newsletter.

Next came the HUD-VASH Coffee Talks, two small-scale events intended to engage anywhere from 5 to 10 new landlords per session. The smaller, more intimate settings allowed personalized networking and thoughtful relationship building. The talks had mixed success, with the first event having only one attendee and the second event increasing to seven attendees. Although the events were hosted during the day, the committee later realized that most landlords in Chicago held unrelated full-time jobs. Consequently, many could not attend the daytime event. The committee speculated that events held on weekends or evenings might enhance participation. With the greater success of the second coffee talk, marketed through the SCH's Chicago Bilingual Landlord Association, the committee also realized that landlords are more likely to attend events sponsored through known affiliates.

Finally, a large-scale landlord engagement event took place in October 2017, bringing together landlords, property management associations, realtors, brokers, homeless service providers, the CHA, and other federal partners including leadership from the Jesse Brown VAMC and HUD. To get the word out, the committee relied on event flyers, mass email distributions, social media, marketing at other events, and word of mouth. The scale of this event made it more similar in design to a seminar or conference. Workshops on fair housing laws and various housing programs were conducted to educate attendees unfamiliar with the topics. Each landlord and property owner in attendance received a 5x7 index card requesting information on unoccupied units. These cards would be reintroduced later at the event to help attendees pledge their housing units to homeless Veterans. **As a result of their engagement activities, the committee secured commitments for**

“Momentum and will are so important. We need to continue these landlord engagement meetings and keep doing our quarterly events. It could be a workshop, it could be a coffee talk. Informal laid back coffee talk. You can even do it monthly! Just make sure you keep doing something to engage them.”

Araceli Orona, LCSW,
HUD-VASH Team Leader
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133 apartment units for Chicago homeless providers. This was significantly higher than their desired goal of 50 units.

At each event, it was important to track attendance to evaluate how successful the marketing and organizing efforts were. These events created great opportunities to secure contact and available unit information. A significant component of engagement efforts was obtaining landlord commitment to future participation. Before attendees left each event, large or small, time was reserved for them to pledge housing units to the cause.

It is important to note that these events had no budget or operating funds. Everything was arranged through volunteers and in-kind donations. The committee members acknowledged that navigating VA regulations can be challenging and time consuming. Facilities are encouraged to meet with their local General Counsel Office, Ethics Committee, Public Relations Office, Voluntary Service and Executive Leadership to keep them updated regularly and ensure that the required approvals are granted. Given the multiple levels of approval required for issues such as accepting donated space to host events or meeting with city officials, it is important to start efforts early and allow sufficient lead-time. Staff at Jesse Brown note that the form of the engagement activity is often less important than the consistency of the activity. They decided to host events quarterly and considered subsequent housing fairs or other workshops following initial engagement. Although many landlords have managed their business for years, they found significant value in the workshops, especially when learning about topics such as fair housing law and federal housing subsidies. Most importantly, each event was followed by a housing drive, linking the marketing and engagement activities to actual Veterans needing housing. Their initial drive goal was to house 50 chronic (CH) and long term (LT) homeless Veterans from October 1, 2017 through December 31, 2017. **The community housed 34 CH and LT Veterans during the drive period and housed an additional 34 CH and LT Veterans in the two months that followed.**

CONCLUSION

The committee remains interested in sustaining the momentum. They are developing more events for the next year with the goal of hosting at least one major event a quarter. With their sustained, consistent engagement efforts, they are confident that they can continue to identify affordable housing for the community's homeless Veterans. We would like to thank the dedicated staff at the Jesse Brown VAMC for sharing their practice with us.

If you have questions about this practice, please contact Araceli Orona, LCSW, HUD-VASH Team Leader at Araceli.Orona@va.gov.