

Robert J. Dole VAMC – “ONE TEAM – ONE FIGHT” Model for Effective Service Coordination
An Innovative Practice in VHA Homeless Program Operations

White Paper

VA



U.S. Department
of Veterans Affairs

Developed by
VHA National Homeless Program Office

INTRODUCTION

The VHA Homeless Program Office identifies and disseminates innovative practices in homeless program operations. The Robert J. Dole VA Medical Center (RJDVAMC) in Wichita, KS has been identified as a site with an innovative practice in team building and effective cross-program collaboration.

PRACTICE OVERVIEW

Team-based leadership models that leverage common goals and shared responsibility of outcomes to foster trust, transparency, accountability, and collaboration are effective in developing high performing homeless service systems.

In October 2017, after hiring new leadership to manage the RJDVAMC Homeless Program, an improvement project was launched to address poor Homeless Program staff cohesion both within the VA Medical Center (VAMC) and with the community at large. Historically, this lack of cohesion created broad and systemic barriers that made it difficult for Veterans to connect to housing. To help focus efforts, the newly-hired Homeless Program Supervisor borrowed concepts from her 19 years of service in the United States Army as a Behavioral Health Officer. A key objective in military training was for leadership to motivate and inspire soldiers to willingly lay down their lives both for the good of the mission and each other. She believed that assertive and supportive leadership, informed by similar principles, could motivate and inspire Homeless Program staff to go above and beyond in service of a collective mission – ending Veteran homelessness. What emerged was ONE TEAM – ONE FIGHT, a concept driven towards the creation of a system in which every service provider shared responsibility for ending homelessness for all Veterans. Instead of a collection of disconnected programs with disparate goals and objectives, this would be a system where everyone was accountable to each other, collaboratively drove system-wide improvements, and bore equal responsibility for collective setbacks and successes. One team. One fight. As a framework, it featured four key components: Mission First, Building Trust and Transparency, Battle Buddy System, and Accountability.

MISSION FIRST

Mission First emphasized the need for a shared goal that would inform shared responsibility for all Veterans experiencing homelessness. Prior to ONE TEAM – ONE FIGHT, sections and staff of the RJDVAMC Homeless Programs such as Housing and Urban Development-VA Supportive Housing (HUD-VASH), Health Care for Homeless Veterans (HCHV) Outreach, HCHV Contract Emergency Residential Services (CERS), Veterans Justice Outreach (VJO), Homeless Veterans Community Employment Services (HVCES), and Nursing were siloed and segmented. Community providers who also worked with homeless Veterans



throughout the Wichita Continuum of Care (CoC), such as Supportive Services for Veteran Families (SSVF) grantees, operated independently and without collaboration as well. Opaque clinical and programmatic decisions were frequently made without consultation with the other programs, despite potential negative impact to these programs.

Fortunately, since 2010, all VAMCs throughout the United States have worked toward a common agenda – ending Veteran homelessness. The current federal strategic plan is outlined by the United States Interagency Council on Homelessness’s Home, Together¹. Paired with the Criteria and Benchmarks for Achieving the Goal of Ending Veteran Homelessness², these two frameworks ensured that homeless service providers had a common understanding of the challenge at hand, along with clear strategies that could direct actions. The Homeless Program Supervisor at the RDJVAMC leaned on this national mission as the unifying goal for the whole community. However, getting staff on board required increasing trust, transparency, and accountability among the various teams in nearly all aspects of service delivery. In late 2017, efforts to implement ONE TEAM – ONE FIGHT kicked off in earnest with a full Homeless Program staff meeting to outline the upcoming changes. At the forefront was the message that each Veteran served belonged to each member of this team. Consistent with coordinated entry principles, the RJDVAMC would no longer ask “is this Veteran appropriate for my program.” Instead, as a Homeless Program, the team members would collectively consider, “of all of the programs within our community, what is the right combination of services to most effectively serve this household.” If any given Veteran belonged to everyone, it was incumbent on everyone to find the best options for them.

“ONE TEAM – ONE FIGHT is about creating a system where everyone “owns” the Veteran and their homeless status. It also is a system where we are all accountable to each other – we are all responsible for our failures and our successes in ending Veteran homelessness. It is a commitment to eliminating barriers and inefficiencies in the system– a system we are all part of – not just our own organization, program, or caseload.”

Suzanne Jenkins
Homeless Program
Supervisor
Robert J. Dole VAMC

¹ Home, Together; United States Interagency Council on Homelessness, <https://www.usich.gov/home-together/>

² Criteria and Benchmarks for Achieving the Goal of Ending Veteran Homelessness, <https://www.usich.gov/tools-for-action/criteria-for-ending-veteran-homelessness/>



BUILDING TRUST AND TRANSPARENCY

The development of trust and transparency went hand-in-hand. Team members needed to see that they were treated fairly, that decisions were made objectively and with the goal of implementing the best possible solution, and that no individual party's interests were inappropriately favored over another. The Homeless Program Supervisor created a way to share weekly HUD-VASH caseload status counts with all Homeless Program staff so that everyone would know how many Veterans each team worked with, how many Veterans were housed, how many were seeking housing, the acuity and case management intensity level of each Veteran, and how much caseload capacity existed to work with new Veterans. This helped highlight Veterans who experienced barriers to housing and gave team members visibility into opportunities to support each other.

The improvement project's initial assessment highlighted the divisiveness between sections. To address this, the Homeless Program Supervisor diligently and consistently reinforced that there was not a "HUD-VASH Program" or a "HCHV Program". Instead, there was one RJDVAMC VA Homeless Program. When one section wanted to create a new policy or implement a system change, the first two questions the Supervisor would ask "How is this going to enhance Veteran care?" and "How is this going to impact the overall Homeless Program and community?" This had the clearest impact in the interplay between HUD-VASH, HCHV Outreach, and HCHV CERS. Veterans exiting HUD-VASH housing due to eviction or other housing issues would need shelter options. The lack of advanced communication or coordination led to Veterans not getting timely access to shelter. Following the rollout of ONE TEAM – ONE FIGHT, when Veterans were in need of additional or alternative programs and services, these cases were reviewed by the relevant program leads to ensure that Veterans would have concrete and actionable case plans that quickly reengaged them and kept them participating in services.

Weekly section huddles were another way to build trust and transparency. Huddles gave Homeless Program leadership an opportunity to discuss any issues, problems, or service barriers with staff and solicit ideas for resolution. When tentative plans were developed, huddles were used to solicit additional feedback before finalization. The huddles also gave employees the ability to staff individual cases, give support and help to each other, and bring up new issues that needed resolved.

BATTLE BUDDY SYSTEM

Prior to ONE TEAM – ONE FIGHT, RJDVAMC Homeless Program staff kept their doors shut, rarely spoke to each other, were afraid to share challenges, and displayed an overall lack of trust. The Battle Buddy System meant that, "we never leave a battle buddy behind". This was a concept used in the military to help strengthen



team bonds and reinforce teamwork through collective responsibility. If one person struggled in a section – then the whole section struggled as well. If one person did not meet their productivity targets, then the whole program would not make the performance measure targets. This concept reinforced team cohesion such that staff began to partner with each other.

ACCOUNTABILITY

Accountability relied on a shared measurement system as it was often nearly impossible to determine whether or not goals were actually being achieved without a shared language to measure success. For this, the homeless program leads relied on the Homeless Services Scorecard. These measures focused on processes and outcomes such as increasing engagement of unsheltered Veterans, reducing exits from HUD-VASH and HCHV CERS programs for negative reasons, and full utilization of HUD-VASH vouchers. Additionally, the Homeless Program Supervisor also looked at individual staff productivity in the form of weighted relative value units (wRVUs) as well as overall team and service satisfaction in the form of All Employee Survey (AES) scores. As time went on, each staff person had ONE TEAM – ONE FIGHT elements added to their individual performance plan. Excellent and outstanding performance ratings were heavily dependent on the employees demonstrating how they implemented, strengthened, and otherwise lived the ONE TEAM – ONE FIGHT concept.

Accountability was uncomfortable for the team members at first, with significant pushback in the early months. However, as team members held themselves and each other accountable and applied prosocial pressure on each other for positive improvements, they began to support one another. Assigning clear responsibility for an initiative, giving deadlines, following up on progress, soliciting feedback, providing support to remove or address barriers, and sharing status updates with all staff was critical for implementing change.

TAKING ONE TEAM – ONE FIGHT TO THE COMMUNITY

When a new Coordinated Entry and Community Engagement Coordinator joined the team in July 2018, RJDVAMC was ready to expand ONE TEAM – ONE FIGHT to their community partners. Key to this was messaging the common agenda to agencies and stakeholders throughout Wichita, that all Veterans belonged to everyone. Weekly face-to-face case conferencing meetings were established to help monitor and support Veterans as they navigate the housing process. As barriers were identified, VA and other providers were on hand to problem solve and provide support. Notably, many of the problems that were identified in community meetings were not interpersonal, but systems related. These problems were often resolved with revised policies and procedures and education on role clarity. Homeless Program leadership previously only heard



about conflicts with staff members or problems that looked to be interpersonal. With changes in mindsets inspired by ONE TEAM – ONE FIGHT, community members started from a position that challenges were systemic or programmatic in origin and did not cast blame on individuals.

OUTCOMES AND CONCLUSION

ONE TEAM – ONE FIGHT led to significant improvements throughout the RJDVAMC **as evidenced by positive increases AES scores**. The team felt that their co-worker relationships, communication, and performance evaluation criteria were no longer negative issues and instead focused on growth and innovation within the Homeless Program and recognition of each other's successes. As the concept became a cultural norm, spontaneous celebrations of successes, achievements, and milestones by the team were more frequent. Team members celebrated program successes and personal life events. Throughout the RJDVAMC halls, it was common to hear, "I have a wonderful workgroup", and "I couldn't do this job without my team". We would like to thank the dedicated staff at the Robert J. Dole VAMC for sharing their practice with us. For more information, please contact Suzanne Jenkins, LICSW, Homeless Program Supervisor, at Suzanne.Jenkins2@va.gov and Melissa Davison, LSCSW, HCHV CERS & GPD Coordinator, at Melissa.Davison@va.gov.

