

Overton Brooks VAMC – Effective Integration of Employment Services
An Innovative Practice in VHA Homeless Program Operations

White Paper

VA



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INTRODUCTION

The VHA Homeless Program Office identifies and disseminates innovative practices in homeless program operations. The Overton Brooks VA Medical Center (VAMC) in Shreveport, LA has been identified as a site with an innovative practice for their effective integration of employment into homeless services.

PRACTICE OVERVIEW

Fully integrating employment services into programs for Veterans experiencing homelessness leads to excellent employment outcomes that significantly exceed national performance targets.

In fiscal year (FY) 2014, VA enhanced employment services and opportunities for Veterans experiencing homelessness through the implementation of Homeless Veterans Community Employment Services (HVCES). HVCES is staffed by Vocational Development Specialists who function as Community Employment Coordinators (CEC) and Employment Specialists. In addition to providing direct services to Veterans, CECs are tasked with collaborating with community, state, and federal partners to provide training and support services that are often unavailable within VA and with engaging employers to develop new job opportunities for Veterans who have experienced homelessness. Consequently, the CEC's scope is often operationally and geographically broad. CECs spend considerable time developing partnerships that link Veterans to VA and community employment resources. They must also monitor these partnerships and intervene as issues arise. To achieve this goal, staff at the Overton Brooks VAMC executed an ambitious strategy to embed and integrate the CEC into nearly every aspect of both VA and community homeless and employment operations.

For most CECs across VA, integration starts at home by inserting employment services within the primary programs and services offered by VHA homeless programs. At Overton Brooks, the CEC began by developing close ties to the Housing and Urban Development-VA Supportive Housing (HUD-VASH) staff. This was accomplished by locating the CEC's assigned workstation in the heart of the HUD-VASH shared office space and through having the initial orientation and training completed by a HUD-VASH social worker. Integration continued to develop due to participation in daily clinical huddles that allowed the CEC to understand HUD-VASH specific client issues, recommend employment strategies, prioritize clients for additional employment services, and identify Veterans needing employment focused home visits. When monthly all-client reviews were added, the CEC prepared and distributed a list of the approximately 140 Veterans participating in HUD-VASH to be discussed. As Veterans were reviewed, the CEC ensured that Veterans' income and employment status were noted and updated in the Homeless Operations Management and Evaluation System (HOMES) database. As homeless program staff from other programs progressively began to recognize that the CEC was not solely a HUD-VASH resource, similar huddles and

meetings eventually took place for Grant and Per-Diem and the Safe Haven. These discussions allowed the social work staff to better understand the benefits of Veterans having competitive employment and the role that income plays in housing stability. After income generation became a routine item during clinical staff meetings, the CEC took things one step further and introduced the concept of income maximization. Previously, if a Veteran had Social Security Administration (SSA) or Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) benefit income, staff at Overton Books simply stopped there, believing that the Veteran reached their fullest income potential. However, the CEC fostered discussions of how Veterans could maximize their income through supplemental benefit streams or employment. This was a significant paradigm shift for the staff. Since the paths to income generation and maximization look different for each Veteran, an income component was included in every Veteran's treatment plan. This could involve external referrals to Veterans Service Officers for VBA benefits or internal referrals to one of the homeless programs two SSI/SSDI Outreach, Access, and Recovery (SOAR) practitioners for SSA benefits. It could also involve a referral to the CEC for VA and community employment services.

A common challenge encountered by employment specialists across VA is figuring out how to engage with Veterans at various stages of change in their employment journey. It is often difficult to identify whether a Veteran is contemplating employment, is determined to proceed with employment, or is in a pre-contemplative state. To solve this problem, while enhancing access to employment services, in March of 2015 the CEC began hosting Employment Assistance Groups. Held every Tuesday morning, Veterans could walk-in to the groups and learn about the various VA and community based employment resources. The standing time and walk-in structure made the group an effective access point to initiate CEC services while also reducing the no-show rate for individual appointments. Veterans would be offered individualized employment assistance after attending their first group session. In keeping with good customer service principles, the CEC offered an initial individual session without group attendance for Veterans with unique challenges and in response to urgent requests from case managers.

"It's a continuum. Income generation is at the beginning. And at the other end is income maximization. We work to make sure the Veteran has all eligible income sources".

**Willie Hammontree,
Community Employment
Coordinator,
Overton-Brooks VAMC**

Beyond the successful integration of employment services across Overton Brooks' homeless programs, the CEC utilized his presence in the community to support Shreveport, LA's greater efforts in ending Veteran homelessness. Specifically, the CEC was instrumental in developing the implementation plan for certification of achieving the goal of ending Veteran homeless under the Federal Criteria and Benchmarks (FC+B). When the FC+B was first released in 2015, the CEC helped the local Continuum of Care (CoC) interpret its guidelines and developed tools to track progress. This brought him in contact with most of

Overton Brooks' CoC partners. The CEC also attended the by-name-list (BNL) meetings where, each week, every known homeless Veteran was discussed. There, he helped maintain the BNL by providing updates from the VA and ensuring that the meetings stayed true to the established process. The BNL meetings were new opportunities for the CEC to raise the topic of income generation to the forefront of Veterans securing housing and eventually lead to a process by which all Veteran currently experiencing homelessness on the BNL were offered basic employment services. As the word of the CEC's good work spread, community partners across the catchment area began inviting the CEC to further assist with FC+B certification efforts, providing even more opportunities to educate partners on the importance of income generation for Veterans experiencing homelessness.

Key to the CEC's integration was the HCHV Coordinator, Overton-Brook's homeless program lead. Recognizing the importance of relationship building, the Coordinator permitted the CEC to engage in many activities that, while beyond traditional conceptualizations of employment services, were still consistent with the breadth and flexibility of the CEC role. The Coordinator's reasoning was that if the CEC could make inroads by providing services valued by a potential partner, he could then pivot to focus on employment. This strategy

"Every day I see Veterans living well below what we would think of as a living wage. Each Veteran has their own idea of what a 'living wage' means to them and they'll let you know when they make enough money to live the lifestyle they want. Everyone wants more money, but Veterans will also tell you when making more money is or isn't worth the compromises necessary to do it."
Willie Hammontree,
Community Employment Coordinator,
Overton-Brooks VAMC

ultimately paid off. **The City of Shreveport was certified as ending Veteran homelessness in December 2016. Additionally, at the end of FY 2017, the 61 percent of employable Veterans participating in HUD-VASH had obtained competitive employment, greatly exceeding the performance goal of 38 percent.**

CONCLUSION

Overton Brooks' commitment to embedding services in homeless programs to increase income and improve employment outcomes has created a thriving culture that ensures the financial stability of Veterans experiencing and who have previously experienced homelessness. We would like to thank the dedicated staff at the Overton Brooks VAMC for sharing their practice with us. If you have questions about this practice, please contact Willie Hammontree, Community Employment Coordinator, at Willie.Hammontree@va.gov.