

VA Pacific Islands HCS – Employment Case Conferencing

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 VA Pacific Islands Health Care System (HCS) in Honolulu, HI has been identified as a site with an innovative practice for their employment focused case conferencing.

PRACTICE OVERVIEW

Case conferencing sessions, staffed by vocational development specialists, are effective in connecting homeless and formerly homeless Veterans to employment.

Developing a well-coordinated and efficient community system is critical to VA's work to end homelessness among Veterans. To meet this goal, homeless programs recognize the need for consistent, inclusive case conferencing processes to support the case coordination and problem-solving that occurs with regular case management. Interestingly, the principles of high-quality case conferencing are transferable to other populations and for different purposes. Such was the case when, in November 2017, the Community Employment Coordinator (CEC) for the VA Pacific Islands HCS attended a "Vet Aid Resource Fair." After being introduced to a local Supportive Services for Veteran Families (SSVF) caseworker, the two discussed challenges and frustrations caused by barriers inherent to the homeless experience. These were simple but impactful barriers such as not being able to contact the Veteran if they did not have a phone or a location to receive letters. An onlooker to the conversation joined in and expressed their own frustrations with helping Veterans increase their motivation to seek employment. They all agreed that finding effective solutions necessitated consultation with VA.

Community providers often do not have access to information that would provide critical clinical context for the Veterans they work with. Some Veterans seeking employment may be experiencing mental health issues such as depression and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), while others may be addressing their substance use or chronic medical problems. As the resource fair ended, the CEC reflected and recalled that many of these helpful ad hoc case conferences happened spontaneously and primarily during one-on-one encounters. While these encounters were great at generating ideas, they were inefficient in disseminating solutions at a scale needed to meaningfully benefit their community's Veterans. Inspired by the case conferencing processes that were critical to robust and well-functioning homeless coordinated entry systems, the CEC believed that the way forward was to have all relevant employment partners meet in the same space, at the same time, to have one unified



conversation. Upon returning to the office later that day, the CEC hatched a plan to do just that. She emailed all her employment contacts and asked if they would be interested in an *employment* case conference. Though it took a few weeks for all the responses to come in, eventually everyone signed up. Thus, the Employment Team was born.

The Employment Team was the name given to their new case conferencing process. Its core members included the VA homeless program's CEC, the facility's Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors and Compensated Work Therapy (CWT) staff, grantees of both the U.S. Department of Labor's (DOL) Veterans Training Service's (VETS) "Homeless Veterans Reintegration Program" (HVRP) and their "Jobs for Veterans State Grants" (JVSG) program, representatives from the State of Hawaii's Department of Labor and Industrial Relations (DLIR), local Disabled Veterans' Outreach Program (DVOP) specialists, and Local Veterans Employment Representatives (LVERs). Additional members from Veteran-focused organizations, employers, and interested parties also attended. Occasionally, even the Veterans Integrated Service Network (VISN) 21's Network Homeless Coordinator (NHC) or the National Director for Homeless Veteran Community Employment Services (HVCES) joined. Their first case conferencing session took place in January 2018. In lieu of meeting in a physical space, the team decided to meet via conference call using the VA Nationwide Teleconferencing System (VANTS). This way, attendees could participate from anywhere among the islands or even from the mainland.

"These conferences are great as they are opportunities for us to encourage each other while also filling in the missing pieces of a Veteran's story. For most Veterans, we have all worked with them at some point or another. We have pieces of the puzzle scattered all over the community and these conferences help us see the whole picture."

Jackie S. Nguyen
Community Employment
Coordinator
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The 90-minute conference call took place once per month. On the week prior to each meeting, the CEC sent out an email invitation and reminder asking the attendees to come prepared to discuss their Veterans with the highest barriers and greatest challenges. With the time allotted, the Team usually reviewed, at most, two cases per call. Although they could spend less time on each case and review more Veterans, they instead opted to take a "deep dive" approach. In addition to reviewing the Veterans' situations, they also reviewed how the staff and community partners dealt with and worked through frustration and conflict. Unsurprisingly, the most common barriers discussed focused on the circumstances of Veterans' homelessness: lack of telephones or mailing



addresses, aging issues, untreated mental health, lack of identifying documentation, frequent moves from location to location, and sometimes lifetime registered sex offender status. Releases of information were developed across multiple providers for effective coordination. In addition to offering concrete, practical suggestions, the case conference provided attendees an opportunity to receive emotional support and encouragement. Occasionally, the CEC brought in trainers to help improve competency on cultural and clinical practice issues.

These conferences were not just “information for information’s sake,” and the CEC ensured that the appropriate team members knew what concrete follow-up steps were needed for Veterans to progress. This often included connecting Veterans to emergency shelter providers, to resources that could address Veterans lacking cell phones, to the VAMC to begin to address mental health issues, and to local employers with job opportunities Veterans with a history of sex offense. As many of the providers already worked with many of the Veterans reviewed, developing action plans was often simply a matter of connecting the dots. Occasionally, a partner would help a Veteran overcome a barrier prior to the meeting, and they were able to use the time to share the good news. The CEC noted that the entire process has a collegial feel that helped break down silos amongst the various employment and vocational service providers. **At the close of fiscal year (FY) 2018, 60.56 percent of Veterans housed and in case management with the Housing and Urban Development-VA Supportive Housing (HUD-VASH) program had full or part-time employment by the end of the year, improving upon the FY 2017 score of 53.74 percent and greatly exceeding the performance target of 40 percent.** Starting in FY 2019, the Employment Team plans to monitor outcomes for the individual Veterans reviewed during the case conference.

CONCLUSION

Most Veterans can access services through the standard processes. For those Veterans with greater challenges, particularly when seeking employment, case conferencing can be a powerful tool to identify solutions and move Veterans closer to achieving their goals.

We would like to thank the dedicated staff at the VA Pacific Islands HCS for sharing their practice with us. For more information, please contact Jackie Nguyen, Community Employment Coordinator at Jackie.Nguyen2@va.gov.

