

VA Puget Sound HCS – VA / Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks Partnership
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 VA Puget Sound Health Care System (HCS) has been identified as a site with an innovative practice for their effective partnership with the Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks (the Elks).

PRACTICE OVERVIEW

Local implementations of national partnerships are effective in increasing emergency financial assistance and other resources available for Veterans experiencing homelessness.

In the ongoing mission to end Veteran homelessness, VA recognizes that developing national partnerships with organizations across the country is integral to both providing services to Veterans as well as spreading the word about resources that VA provides. With that in mind, in September 2015, VA entered into a Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) with the Elks, a fraternal order founded in 1868 with over 1900 lodges currently in operation across the country. The purpose of the MOA was to advance and improve the quality of life for Veterans experiencing homelessness through several key partnership activities, including the following: conducting public awareness campaigns, educating VA staff on the Elks assistance programs, rallying Elks in all communities to assist veterans exiting homelessness by providing home supplies and support, and being directly involved in the mission of ending Veteran homelessness by providing emergency assistance in eight pilot cities. When the Veterans Integrated Service Network (VISN) 20 Network Homeless Coordinator and the leader of the VISN's Voluntary Service learned about the MOA in August 2017, they believed it could potentially enhance homeless program operations in the northwest.

An initial meeting took place in January 2018 at the Seattle division of VA Puget Sound HCS, attended by facility leadership, the facility's Voluntary Service lead, the National Director of the Elks Veterans Programs, and local Elks leaders throughout the Puget Sound region. As it is common for members in the community to confuse representatives from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs with the Washington State Department of Veterans Affairs, it was important to meet in-person to help clarify the distinction as well as discuss collaboration ideas and expectations. While the meeting served to make clear the terms of the MOA to all attendees, one key task was to outline a process by which Veterans could access the Elks' emergency financial assistance fund. This fund would provide Veterans with flexible financial assistance, not to exceed \$2,500. Although the partnership was originally intended to target Seattle, VA Puget Sound HCS advocated that the Elks provide the much-needed flexible funds to Puget Sound's entire 11-county service area.

After significant discussion, a referral process was agreed upon that provided financial assistance to Veterans across Puget Sound within four to seven days of a request. Each referral would be reviewed by a VA homeless program supervisor, collected by one two homeless program staff designated to be points-of-contact and then forwarded to the Elks national office. Approved funds were disbursed by the Elks and sent directly to the Veteran's debtors. The new partnership would roll out later that month. To monitor its effectiveness, a SharePoint site was developed to track details about the financial assistance dollars spent including the purposes of the assistance and the number Veterans served.

Flexible funding is a powerful tool to address barriers to stable living. The Elks Lodge volunteers were happy to help with requests for assistance that were uncommon or difficult to address such as car repair fees, legal fines, and unique rent issues. Prior to this partnership, flexible funds in the surrounding rural counties were essentially nonexistent. Additionally, over the past few years, the VA Puget Sound HCS has seen prevention funds and other mainstream resources dry-up along with increases in restrictions on funding usage throughout their service area. With the addition of these new funds, Veterans could address needs previously unfulfilled. Furthermore, a surprising outcome of the partnership has been its positive impact on VA staff morale. At Puget Sound, burnout can manifest from frustrations with being unable to connect Veterans to resources, leading to feelings of ineffectiveness among staff. The ability to connect Veterans to these new funds has been empowering. To help increase their capacity to obtain additional funds, the Elks have focused their own grant writing efforts to work with VA Puget Sound specifically.

"The Elks are all incredibly flexible. Their funds, their people, all flexible. They really want to know and go after where their help will be the most impactful for our Veterans."

**Kristin Huson, LICSW
Associate Director for
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Outreach Services
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Key to this practice is effective relationship building and maintenance, with a heightened focus on responsiveness to inquiries. The Associate Director for the homeless program assigned a social worker to be the primary point-of-contact for the Elks' grant writer so that, when the Elks call, calls are answered immediately or returned as soon as possible. Additionally, to ensure that the partnership stayed in the team's collective consciousness, an Elks Lodge agenda item was added to their weekly supervisor huddles and clinical staffing meetings.

The homeless program staff at Puget Sound found that they had to be flexible with time as a considerable number of Elks volunteers are retirees with different schedules from VA staff. Placing

phone calls after hours was more effective at reaching volunteers than by using email during normal business hours. Additionally, VA staff educated Lodge members on VA rules and practical considerations. Veterans may require beds to sleep on, but VA staff may not be able to transport them. Donors may wish to provide food to Veterans, but VA may not be able to distribute them.

Facilities are encouraged to reach out to, and partner with, Elks Lodges within their own service areas. Local Elks Lodges can help conduct activities such as housing fairs and donation drives, as well as provide veterans exiting homelessness with stock “welcome home” kits. Staff at Puget Sound strongly recommend that homeless programs work closely with their facility’s Voluntary Service as there are many unintended mistakes and consequences that can be made with money and donations. Not only that, but Voluntary Service has expertise in maintaining goodwill with VA partner organizations. It is advised that homeless program leads interested in replicating this practice start discussions at the leadership level and later empower frontline staff for broad-based action as the partnership develops. It is critical that homeless program leadership maintain oversight over content and materials that are presented and disseminated to the Elks. Standardized PowerPoint presentations that are scripted, rehearsed, and cleared by facility leadership is strongly encouraged. Notably, these practices used by Puget Sound in their work with the Elks are also effective when working with other non-profits and community partners.

From January 2018 to June 2018, 52 Veterans in Puget Sound received a total of \$24,517 through the partnership. Nationally, the Elks have provided 1935 emergency assistance requests to 1320 homeless and at-risk Veterans since the MOA started in 2015, totaling more than \$2 million. Additionally, the Elks have provided 64 grants, worth a total of \$284,480 to Lodges in and near the original eight targeted cities. The Elks are proud of the work they’ve done, and are looking to expand their partnership with the VA. Though the emergency assistance program is only available in the eight targeted cities, Elks everywhere are working to help end Veteran homelessness. For example, Elks Lodges in locations across the country have provided more than 1500 veterans exiting homelessness with kits of home supplies to establish their own homes.

CONCLUSION

When local communities leverage national partnerships, Veterans experiencing homelessness can access a wealth of resources to help them on their journey to independence and housing. We would like to thank the dedicated staff at VA Puget Sound HCS for sharing their practice with us. For more information about this practice, please contact Kristin Huson, Associate Director of VA Community Housing and Outreach Services for the VA Puget Sound HCS at Kirstin.Huson@va.gov.