

The Department of Veterans Affairs (Veterans Health Administration) is a Trailblazer in Delivering Essential Services at Scale, with Speed

Homelessness is a crisis of speed.

When you walk into a retail store, someone usually greets you right away. This is because you're more likely to become a customer if you feel welcomed and connected than if you were just left to linger. It is the same with someone seeking healthcare or benefits services – they are less likely to leave if they can be identified, triaged, and helped right away. Just like any other form of service and support, solving homelessness is a matter of speed.

The Veterans Health Administration (VHA) is the healthcare arm of the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). It is the largest integrated health care system in the country, managing 1,255 health care facilities as well as a number of programs like the [Supportive Services for Veteran Families \(SSVF\) program](#) or the [Grant and Per Diem \(GDP\) program](#) with the help of service providers that help people move from homelessness to housing.

In its efforts to end Veteran homelessness, VHA and its partners use proven practices, such as housing-first approaches, to ensure that Veterans have the foundation they need to succeed, figuratively and literally. VHA has seen that the faster they can get a Veteran into housing, the more likely that the Veteran will access supportive services to sustain their housing, as well as increase the odds that they will exit homelessness for good.

VHA, by the numbers.

- VHA manages 1,255 health care facilities, including 170 medical centers, and more than 1,000 outpatient clinics across the country.
- It also, through its VA Medical Centers and grants to homeless service providers, oversees a number of programs and initiatives that meet the needs of Veterans who are homeless or at risk of homelessness.
- Over 9 million Veterans are enrolled in VHA programs.
- Learn more at va.gov/homeless.

Again, solving homelessness is a matter of speed. And that has only been made more apparent by the challenges impacting our nation as a whole as of late.

Homelessness is a compounding issue.

First, housing has become increasingly expensive, especially in regions that happen to have a higher number of homeless Veterans. In 2019 the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development estimated that nearly 70% of the nation's unsheltered Veteran population lived in California. Five of the top ten counties were in the San Francisco Bay Area and the Los Angeles metropolitan region, two areas known for having exceptionally expensive real estate as of late within an already expensive state.¹ In the Portland area, where the median home price has been on an upward trend since 2013, an estimated 473 Veterans experience homelessness on any given night.² This makes it harder for public housing programs to help Veterans find a place they can afford.

This was all before Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) hit. COVID-19 introduced a new level of risk to people and Veterans facing life on the streets. After the first full quarter with most of the country under some sort of shelter-in-place guidelines, the U.S. Department of Labor estimated that more than 20 million people lost their job, driving the unemployment rate to 14.7%,³ making the job search that much harder, and therefore the ability to secure and maintain housing in increasingly expensive markets that much more difficult. This puts even more strain on already limited resources, as social distancing guidelines put stringent limitations on the number of available beds in what were already packed shelters. There is not always the space to quarantine or isolate, exacerbating the challenges VHA, and others face on ordinary days.

¹ <https://www.hudexchange.info/resource/5877/2019-pit-estimate-of-veteran-homelessness-in-the-us/>

² <https://www.zillow.com/portland-or/home-values/#:~:text=The%20typical%20home%20value%20of,7.3%25%20in%20the%20next%20year>

³ <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/pdf/empsit.pdf>

Introducing an advanced query system on the cloud.

VHA launched version 2.0 of the Status Query and Response Exchange System (SQUARES) in February 2019 on Salesforce’s FedRAMP-authorized Government Cloud Platform. It is a search engine-style database that allows authorized users to look up a person in need of service, identify them as a Veteran, and determine their VHA eligibility status, quickly and reliably. Here’s how it works:

Self-service portals built on Experience Cloud serve as an interface between the VA’s customer relationship management (CRM) platform and third-party systems. Service provider employees external to VA can log into the Community Cloud portal, look up a name (or several names at once), and access VHA eligibility data, demographic information, and more from the Veteran’s profile. Details about a given Veteran are stored in a comprehensive, profile-like setting via Service Cloud. Data from third-party systems like the Master Veteran Index and the VA-Department of Defense (DOD) Identify Repository—the nation’s two main databases housing service member history—can also be incorporated, building a 360-degree view of the Veteran at the core of the SQUARES solution.

Salesforce Shield was added to bring an additional layer of security to the solution. Platform Encryption maintains critical functionality, such as SQUARES advanced search capabilities, while natively encrypting the more sensitive data, including personal identifiable information (PII) data that is found in Veteran profiles and is especially critical given VHA’s execution model. While VHA manages 1,255 healthcare facilities directly, it manages far more programs and services through its service provider “partners” across the country. And these organizations, whether they be city or county-run food pantries, homeless shelters, and so on, are more likely to be staffed by state and local government employees, volunteers from community or faith-based groups, and more. They are not likely to be staffed by federal employees, with approved access to a federal database like VHA’s, and thus, this user-centric design gives the right employee the right access to the right eligibility information, all with that much needed sense of urgency. To date SQUARES has over 2,100 users – i.e.: 2,100 people with the right access to the right information, at the right time to help a Veteran.



Depending on the SQUARES outcomes, VA employees and homeless service providers are provided with an eligibility determination so they can begin the enrollment or referral process to assist Veterans with accessing VA healthcare and homeless programs (SSVF and GPD).

The system was executed to support VA medical centers and service providers nationwide via a single platform instead of being made available on several, more localized on-premise systems, which helps enable staff in any city, county or state to look up a Veteran who might have changed location since their last interaction. A reusable set of application programming interfaces (APIs) give SQUARES sustainability; new systems or databases can be mapped in, templates can be used with other programs, and practices can be applied to future endeavors.

Interested in becoming a SQUARES User?

Any staff member who works with Veterans at a VA homeless program grantee organization, as well as eligible homeless service organizations, are authorized for SQUARES access. Learn more by visiting va.gov/homeless/squares/index.asp.

The results and impacts are threefold.

The results and impacts of SQUARES strategy are threefold: (1) empowers and helps enable service providers to be faster and more efficient, (2) unlocks data-driven insights while also giving a community-oriented face to VHA, and most importantly (3) helps support the Veterans, who are homeless or at risk of homelessness.

- (1) Empowers and helps enable service providers to be faster and more efficient: Service providers are familiar with the broader Veteran definition that SSVF, GPD, and alternative Veteran grants use. This broader definition captures a big population of underserved homeless Veterans and SQUARES is a key component in ensuring Veterans are referred to the appropriate program and begin serving them.
- (2) Unlocks data-driven insights while also giving a community community-oriented face to VHA: Data driven insights: It gives VHA the kind of timely, contextual data it needs to start pinpointing trends, identifying patterns, and developing actionable insights.
- (3) Helps support the Veterans, who are homeless or at risk of homelessness: It also enables VHA to connect to Veterans at the community level in these extraordinary times.