What Does It Take to End Veteran Homelessness in DC?

We’re en route to ending veteran homelessness in our nation’s capital.

Can DC build on this success to end all chronic homelessness by 2017?
Jacob is a 54-year-old veteran who has been homeless for more than half his life, beginning at the age of 14. Jacob’s severe economic hardships and lack of support from friends and family have been exacerbated by his struggle with bipolar disorder. Six months ago, he became homeless again—but this time he checked with Veterans Affairs and was referred to DC Housing Services. At first, he was hesitant to receive help, because he was not sure it would be permanent and he didn’t want to lose his “homeless feet” that he feels he needs to survive on the streets. Case managers were finally able to create an option that seemed right for Jacob: in addition to housing, they equipped him with a support system to help him with his mental illness. While life isn’t perfect, Jacob affirms there is a light at the end of the tunnel: “It is a scrape for me to get by, but for once I am hopeful.”

James is a Vietnam War veteran who struggled with physical and mental health issues for decades after his service. After being assaulted by his landlord, James became homeless and moved in and out of different shelters and temporary housing situations. Representatives from the Veterans NOW coalition learned of his veteran status, assessed his needs, and provided him with transitional housing. James was placed in a home where he received the housing and group support he needed. His service provider helped him find permanent housing, coordinate his voucher payments, and settle into his new apartment. Now he is the president of the tenants’ association. As James put it, “I’ve got a chance now—another chance on life.”

How can we ensure more of these success stories and end chronic homelessness?
**Introduction**

On a cold winter night in January 2015, 7,298 people were homeless in Washington, DC. Of that number, 408 were veterans and 1,593 were chronically homeless—which HUD defines as someone with a disabling condition that has been homeless for a year or more or has had four episodes of homelessness in the past three years.¹

Washington, DC, and communities across the country are striving to reach the goals set by the US Interagency Council on Homelessness through Opening Doors: Federal Strategic Plan to Prevent and End Homelessness to end veteran homelessness by the end of 2015 and chronic homelessness by the end of 2017.

Due to the hard work of Veterans NOW—a collaboration between government and nonprofit partners—the District is on track to end veteran homelessness. The following report explores how DC is progressing toward this goal, and how the same strategies can be applied to end chronic homelessness by the end of 2017.²

**Methodology**

CEB engaged a pro bono team of researchers to identify the key ingredients of success for the Veterans NOW initiative in Washington, DC. To accomplish this, CEB interviewed executive directors of local nonprofits, members of the Veterans NOW coalition, and a number of formerly homeless veterans. The team also reviewed lessons learned from similar efforts to end homelessness across the country.

**Who Is Veterans NOW?**

Veterans NOW is a collaboration between 11 government and nonprofit agencies that formed in August 2013 to make a plan to end veteran homelessness in Washington, DC by the end of 2015. Using data-driven methods, the group estimated that 1,500 veterans—some of whom were currently homeless and some who would become homeless in the future—would need to be housed in order to meet this goal. The coalition meets multiple times a week to ensure homeless veterans are identified and moved into housing as quickly as possible.

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Ending Veteran Homelessness

Many veterans experiencing homelessness suffer from physical and mental health issues that are exacerbated by unstable and unsafe living conditions on the streets or in shelters. These conditions, in turn, make it extremely difficult to access services and housing.

Since the effort to end veteran homelessness began in August 2013, DC has housed 1,287 veterans. As of October 2015, Veterans NOW projects that only 213 veterans still need permanent housing to reach the goal.

Functional Zero

“Ending homelessness” among veterans means that homelessness among this population is rare and any newly homeless veteran is rapidly placed on the path to housing.

The goal is to reach “functional zero,” which is when there is enough housing to meet the ongoing need. This means preventing homelessness whenever possible and if someone becomes homeless, providing housing in an average of 30 to 60 days.

Emily B.

“All of the organizations in DC are coming together to ensure that we meet this goal. We talk about what is working, what isn’t working, and what can we do to ensure that we get to functional zero. We are planning strategically to ensure that we meet this deadline.

Emily Buzzell
Miriam’s Kitchen
Goals of Veterans NOW

Prior to Veterans NOW, there was not a coordinated effort to identify and house veterans experiencing homelessness in the District. In addition, there was not a data driven plan to end veteran homelessness. The team set out to address these challenges by:

- Creating a list of all veterans experiencing homelessness
- Understanding housing and service needs of all veterans experiencing homelessness
- Setting up a process to identify and assess any future homeless veterans
- Building relationships to effectively match housing providers with homeless veterans
- Identifying enough resources to house all homeless veterans
- Developing processes to match veterans to the right housing resource

The Progress

Number of Veterans Housed in Washington, DC Since August 2013

August 2013–December 2013

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Month</th>
<th>Housed Veterans</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>August 2013–December 2013</td>
<td>207</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>January 2014–December 2014</td>
<td>504</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>January 2015–August 2015</td>
<td>576</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1,287 veterans housed in just over two years

Nadim M.

“There was talk about ending veteran homelessness, and national goals were set. But very few people really believed it—it was just another national goal. Now I think many people truly believe that this can be done, and we are starting to see some cities actually end veteran homelessness.”

Nadim Matta
Rapid Results
Necessary Conditions to Ending Veteran Homelessness

Commitment from Community Leadership

Ending veteran homelessness requires a strong commitment of staff, time, and resources from all key stakeholders, including the mayor, government officials, and nonprofit providers.

DC leaders have publicly committed to this goal through several national initiatives including the Mayor's Challenge to End Veteran's Homelessness and Zero: 2016, a national campaign to end chronic and veteran homelessness in the next two years.

Key DC government agencies and nonprofit partners also commit significant time toward implementing the plan to end veteran homelessness through Veterans NOW. Members of the team meet multiple times a week to review the by-name list of homeless veterans to ensure people are assessed, matched to a housing intervention that best meets their needs, and moved in quickly.

Adequate Housing Resources

Housing ends homelessness. The Federal and DC governments have devoted significant resources to provide housing for veterans who are currently homeless or may experience homelessness in the future. Veterans NOW estimates that the resources are sufficient to meet the current and ongoing need.

Key Strategies to Ending Veteran Homelessness

1. Housing First Initiative

   “Housing First is an approach that emphasizes stable, permanent housing as a primary strategy for ending homelessness.”

   National Alliance to End Homelessness

   Many traditional approaches require resolution or control of chronic mental health problems, substance dependency, or income instability before becoming eligible for permanent supportive housing. The Housing First approach minimizes these preconditions based on the evidence that stable housing provides the foundation necessary for individuals to pursue ancillary services to address issues that often accompany homelessness.
The success of the Housing First model is not limited to efforts to house our veterans. Rather, it is the intervention that is disproportionately needed by people experiencing chronic homelessness and it has helped many people improve their health and stay in housing. However, Washington, DC still isn’t implementing the approach system-wide.

2. Coordination on a Data-Driven Plan

Previously, the myriad of providers and services and lack of coordination between them presented a complex services landscape for homeless individuals to navigate. To address this problem, DC launched a Coordinated Entry System (CES) in August 2013. CES helps providers identify the homeless and their housing and service needs. In addition, CES helps providers across the District work together to end homelessness as quickly as possible. It takes a “no wrong door” approach to service access that guarantees people can obtain housing and other services and resources through any provider that participates in the system. Veterans NOW partners use a real-time coordinated entry database to identify individuals experiencing homelessness, assess their vulnerability, and ensure they are matched to the most optimal housing and services.

The data from the CES, combined with extensive analysis of DC’s Homeless Management Information System has allowed the Veterans NOW team to develop and implement a data-driven plan to end veteran homelessness. Data from these sources allows Veterans NOW to identify the current and future needs, track progress toward goals, and determine the targets that the community needs to reach functional zero.

3. Individualized Services

Veterans NOW dedicates effort to evaluate the best way to help each homeless person—treating each case as a person, not as an item on a checklist. This tailored approach to working with individuals to identify their particular needs helps break the stigma that “hard-to-help” individuals bear, making them feel valued and respected.

“...we’re on a mission: A mission to make homelessness rare, brief, and non-recurring.”

DC Mayor, Muriel Bowser
Applying Lessons

Ending veteran homelessness is a critical stepping stone toward ending chronic homelessness for all DC residents—the same strategies that have been successful in housing District veterans can be scaled up to end chronic homelessness by the end of 2017.

The Cost of Chronic Homelessness

There are many reasons to end chronic homelessness—cost is one of them. Research and experience shows that when considering emergency costs, it is less expensive to pay for permanent supportive housing for individuals experiencing chronic homelessness than it is to do nothing. In a survey conducted in the District, 4,039 individuals collectively used millions of dollars in emergency services in a six-month period through:

- **7,297** Emergency Room Visits
- **2,860** Police Interactions
- **3,595** Ambulance Rides

Research shows that providing a stable home and supportive services drastically reduces the use of emergency services for people experiencing chronic homelessness and improves health outcomes. For example, a Seattle study of permanent supportive housing using the Housing First model found, “taxpayer savings of more than $4 million over the first year of operation, reflecting significant reductions in hospital emergency room visits, inpatient hospitalizations, and stays in sobering facilities and shelters.”
About CEB

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