

Overview of the Mayors Challenge to End Veteran Homelessness

The Mayors Challenge to End Veteran Homelessness was one of several co-reinforcing national initiatives targeted toward ending Veteran homelessness. In 2012, HUD and USICH offered technical assistance to communities through the Dedicating Opportunities to End Homelessness (“DOEH”) by identifying priority communities and bringing together providers of services, government officials, nonprofits, and business leaders. In 2013, Community Solutions, a national non-profit, led a 100,000 Homes Campaign to house 100,000 homeless families and communities; some communities that took part in the campaign focused on Veterans. In 2014 a federal strategy called the 25 Cities Effort provided technical assistance and mobilized planning efforts to align housing and services to end homelessness for Veterans and persons experiencing chronic homelessness for 25 communities nationwide.¹ In June of 2014, First Lady Michelle Obama announced the USICH initiative of a Mayors Challenge to End Veteran Homelessness, which encouraged mayors and other state and local leaders to commit to end Veteran homelessness in their cities in 2015.² Co-occurring with the Mayors Challenge, has been another initiative called Zero: 2016, a movement of communities working to end veteran and chronic homelessness by the end of 2016.³ These initiatives are not a definitive list; there are many other initiatives that have focused on homelessness among Veterans during this timeframe. The Mayors Challenge is highlighted in this study because it was the largest initiative and primarily national initiative regarding homelessness among Veterans during the timeline of this study.

The U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness (“USICH”) released *Opening Doors: Federal Strategic Plan to Prevent and End Homelessness* in 2010, and updated that plan in 2015. The goals outlined in *Opening Doors* are to “prevent and end homelessness among Veterans in 2015; finish the job of ending chronic homelessness in 2017; prevent and end homelessness for families, youth, and children in 2020; and set a path to ending all types of homelessness.”⁴ USICH suggested that the first goal would be successfully achieved when:

“there are no Veterans sleeping on our streets and every Veteran has access to permanent housing. Should Veterans become homeless or be at-risk of becoming homeless, communities will have the capacity to quickly connect them to the help they need to achieve housing stability.”⁵

Opening Doors outlined four key strategies to end Veteran homelessness:

¹ 25 Cities, 2014.

² United States Department of Housing and Urban Development, n.d.1.

³ Community Solutions, November 6, 2014.

⁴ United States Interagency Council for the Homeless, 2010. p. 9

⁵ U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, n.d.1.

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1. **Housing First.** This approach means low-barrier, immediate access to permanent affordable or supportive housing, with no clinical prerequisites such as sobriety or recovery treatments.⁶
2. **Targeting of Permanent Supportive Housing.** This approach “couples permanent housing with supportive services that target the specific needs of an individual or family.”⁷ Targeting permanent supportive housing means using this approach for the most vulnerable Veterans, such as prioritizing those experiencing chronic homelessness.⁸ Permanent Supportive Housing can also be called “permanent housing intervention”.⁹
3. **Providing Rapid Re-Housing Opportunities.** This approach is intended to be applied quickly for eligible Veteran families who are homeless and may remain homeless if not for assistance. Per USICH: “Rapid re-housing provides supportive services and/or time-limited financial assistance to help a household quickly secure housing, including move-in assistance, short- or medium-term rental assistance, and supports to address barriers to long-term housing stability including connections to employment.”¹⁰
4. **Using other community and mainstream resources to serve Veterans.** This approach is meant to serve Veterans who may not be eligible for VA health care, housing or services, with other community resources.¹¹

In order to help communities reach the first goal of ending Veteran homelessness, the VA expanded existing programs and created two new programs to assist homeless Veterans. The two new programs are the HUD-Veterans Affairs Supportive Housing ("VASH") and Supportive Services for Veteran Families ("SSVF"). Between 2009 and 2014, VA funding for programs targeting homeless Veterans has increased from \$376 million to \$1.5 billion annually nationwide.¹²

The USICH considers homelessness among Veterans ended for a community once that community meets four federal benchmarks:

- A. Chronic homelessness among Veterans has been ended.
 - I. The community should have no Veterans experiencing chronic homelessness, with the following conditions:
 - a. Any Veteran offered permanent housing intervention but not yet accepted or entered housing is not included in the count of homeless Veterans;

⁶ U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, n.d.2.

⁷ United States Interagency Council for the Homeless, 2010, p. 41.

⁸ U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, n.d. 2

⁹ United States Interagency Council for the Homeless, October 1, 2015, p. 5.

¹⁰ United States Interagency Council on Homelessness, 2015, p. 20.

¹¹ U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, n.d. 2.

¹² Perl, 2015, p. 36.

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- b. Veterans offered permanent housing intervention, but choosing service-intensive transitional housing are not included in the count of homeless Veterans;
 - c. Providers should continue to outreach to Veterans experiencing chronic homelessness that have not accepted the Permanent housing intervention offer;
 - d. Providers continue to offer Permanent housing intervention at least once every six weeks.
- B. Veterans have quick access to permanent housing.
- I. An average time from identification of a Veteran experiencing homelessness to move into permanent housing is 90 days or less with two exceptions/exclusions (the exceptions are “(1) for any Veteran who had been identified and offered a permanent housing intervention, but had not initially accepted the offer, the average would only include the time from when they accepted the intervention until they moved into housing, and (2) any Veteran who had been offered a permanent housing intervention but chose to enter service-intensive transitional housing prior to moving to a permanent housing destination”);
 - II. Veterans identified and offered Permanent housing intervention, but not initially accepting offer, average only includes time from Permanent housing intervention acceptance until Permanent housing move-in; and
 - III. Veterans offered Permanent housing intervention but chose to enter service-intensive transitional housing prior to moving to Permanent housing.
- C. The community has sufficient permanent housing capacity.
- I. More Veterans move out of homelessness into permanent housing than Veterans who enter into homelessness.
- D. The community is committed to Housing First and provides service-intensive transitional housing only in limited instances.
- I. Only Veterans that have indicated a preference for service-intensive transitional housing will receive service-intensive transitional housing.¹³

Federal representatives from the HUD field office, HUD Regional Administrator, Veterans Integrated Service Networks Homeless Coordinator, VA Medical Center or USICH Homeless Regional Coordinator are available to conduct an interagency review to determine if the benchmarks have been met. Even after a community effectively ends Veteran homelessness, a community still

¹³ United States Interagency Council for the Homeless, October 1, 2015, p. 2-3.

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maintains an “active list” or “by-name” list that identifies all homeless Veterans. This list is refreshed monthly in order to ensure that if Veterans enter into homelessness that the Veteran will have access to housing in 90 days or less.¹⁴

As can be seen from the above benchmarks, ending Veteran homelessness does not mean that there is never going to be another homeless Veteran. The term commonly used for ending Veteran homelessness is “functional zero,” which is defined by the VA as “a well-coordinated and efficient community system that assures homelessness is *rare, brief and non-recurring* and *no Veteran is forced to live on the street*”¹⁵ (emphasis theirs). The VA goes on to state that each community should define functional zero to fit their current homeless situation. For example, the City of New Orleans defined functional zero as “Every newly discovered Veteran living on the streets or in emergency shelter is provided housing within an average of 30 days of finding them, unless they choose to enter a longer-term program instead.”¹⁶ Functional zero is customizable to local goals and initiatives.

In June of 2014, First Lady Michelle Obama announced the USICH initiative of a Mayors Challenge to End Veteran Homelessness, which encouraged mayors and other state and local leaders to commit to end Veteran homelessness in their cities in 2015. In Texas, as of winter of 2015, eight mayors committed their cities to this challenge¹⁷:

1. Mayor Steve Adler – Austin
2. Mayor Ricardo Lopez - Crystal City
3. Mayor Oscar Leeser - El Paso
4. Mayor Betsy Price - Fort Worth
5. Mayor Anise D. Parker – Houston
6. Mayor Harry LaRosiliere – Plano
7. Mayor Ivy R. Taylor - San Antonio
8. Mayor Malcolm Duncan Jr. – Waco

As of summer of 2016, the following cities were shown to have joined the Mayors Challenge.

9. Mayor Norman Archibald – Abilene
10. Mayor Jeff Williams – Arlington

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ United States Veterans Affairs, n.d.

¹⁶ Kegel, 2014.

¹⁷ United States Department of Housing and Urban Development, n.d.1.

11. Mayor Pete Saenz - Laredo

In June, 2015, Mayor Annise Parker announced that Houston had effectively ended Veteran homelessness, thus becoming the largest city in the nation to do so. A short case study of Houston's efforts is included in Appendix K. The City of San Antonio and Austin have also achieved the federal benchmarks to effectively end Veteran homelessness in May, 2016, and August, 2016, respectively. A survey to the eight cities that took the Mayors Challenge in the winter of 2015 was conducted by the TICH Veterans Workgroup. Results of that survey are also provided in Appendix J.

As of December 2, 2015, governors in eight states and one territory had taken the challenge to end Veteran homelessness, including Colorado, Connecticut, Delaware, Illinois, Kentucky, Minnesota, Pennsylvania, Puerto Rico, and Virginia.¹⁸ As of September, 2016, two states, Virginia and Connecticut, are listed by HUD that they met that challenge and effectively ended Veteran homelessness.

¹⁸ United States Department of Housing and Urban Development, n.d.2.