

Effectively Ending Veteran Homelessness in Houston

The seeds of the Mayors Challenge were planted in September 2012 when HUD and the USICH designated Houston as a priority community because of the city's large homeless population. Nine other U.S. communities were also designated priority communities including Atlanta, Chicago, Fresno County, Los Angeles County, New Orleans, Philadelphia/Maricopa County, Phoenix, Seattle, and Tampa.¹ For its 2011 annual January point-in-time ("PIT") count of sheltered and unsheltered homeless, Houston reported that volunteers identified 1,146 Veterans experiencing homelessness.²

As a priority community, Houston was offered HUD Technical Assistance grants under the federal initiative, Dedicating Opportunities to End Homelessness ("DOEH"). As an alternative to offering substantial new funding sources to address issues of homelessness, DOEH provided staff from HUD or USICH regional offices to bring together providers of services, government officials, nonprofits, and business leaders. DOEH encouraged the service providers to target existing resources to homeless and at-risk barriers, while also identifying and removing barriers to access.³

With its designation as a priority community, Houston started planning to effectively end homelessness among Veterans in 2012.⁴ At the time that DOEH had availability in September 2012, Houston had already created a strategic plan to end chronic homelessness, received other technical assistance from HUD, and created a data-driven model that predicted the efforts of various policies on homelessness populations. The Houston/Harris County team coalesced at the Rapid Results Housing Boot Camp in Houston in May 2012.⁵

The Rapid Results Institute is a non-profit organization that works with government agencies, non-governmental organizations and communities to tackle tough societal challenges. The Rapid Results Institute specializes in developing 100-day challenges for helping leaders leverage the results and moment created by these challenges into sustained, long-term impact.⁶ The Boot Camp built on previous efforts to address homelessness using the Six Sigma technique. In turn, this reduced the number of days it took to house persons experiencing homelessness by 40%.⁷ Six Sigma is self-defined as a "disciplined, data-driven approach and methodology for eliminating defects (driving toward six standard deviations between the mean and the nearest specification limit) in any process – from manufacturing to transactional and from product to service."⁸

¹ The Housing News Network, June, 2013.

² United States Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2014b.

³ The Housing News Network, June, 2013.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Maguire, May 4, 2012.

⁶ Rapid Results Institute, 2015.

⁷ Maguire, May 4, 2012.

⁸ i Six Sigma, 2000.

Houston reported in its 2012 annual PIT count that volunteers had identified 1,162 Veterans experiencing homelessness.⁹ In May 2012, Houston’s Rapid Results Housing Boot Camp brought together the U.S. Veterans Administration (“VA”), the public housing authorities, Continuum of Care (“CoC”) member agencies, HUD, and the nonprofit sector.¹⁰ CoC member agencies take part in the CoC program administered by HUD to promote communitywide commitment to end homelessness by providing housing and accessing mainstream services.¹¹

As a result of the Rapid Results Housing Boot Camp, Houston set a goal to house 100 Veterans experiencing chronic homelessness in 100 days.¹² In addition, Houston’s Boot Camp coincided with a nationwide release of \$75 million for additional HUD- Veteran Affairs Supportive Housing (“HUD-VASH”) vouchers, giving Houston additional tools to house Veterans.¹³ Houston’s stakeholders and community leaders created a collaborative called The Way Home, which created a paradigm shift from separate and distinct programs to a homelessness response system.¹⁴ Approximately 30 stakeholders participated in The Way Home, and 25 partner organizations joined The Way Home.¹⁵

When DOEH became available in September 2012, Houston was in the implementation phase of its strategic plan, already having 2,500 units of permanent supportive housing in various phases of construction. Houston committed to the DOEH by hiring a full-time executive assistant to the Mayor for Homelessness Initiatives in 2013.¹⁶ In May 2012, The Way Home also developed a workgroup called Housing Houston’s Heroes. This workgroup standardized intake documents and created a “crosswalk” to illustrate the connections between the agencies providing the housing and services.¹⁷ The Way Home also created the Housing Houston’s Heroes Rapid Re-housing subcommittee to focus on Veterans experiencing literal homelessness.¹⁸

The Way Home had started with mass briefings held by the Houston/Harris County CoC throughout 2012, which brought together the permanent housing process into one location. By March 2013, The Way Home found that the mass briefings were not a long-term solution. The Way Home started a coordinated access system, using the standardized intake documents and crosswalk developed by Housing Houston’s Heroes workgroup. Coordinated access matches the Veterans needs with the most appropriate resources, even if the resource providers were not conducting the assessment.¹⁹

⁹ United States Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2014, 2.

¹⁰ Maguire, May 4, 2012.

¹¹ United States Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2014.

¹² Coalition for the Homeless of Houston/Harris County, June, 2015.

¹³ United States Veterans Affairs, September 30, 2014.

¹⁴ Grier, November, 2014

¹⁵ Coalition for the Homeless of Houston/Harris County, June, 2015.

¹⁶ The Housing News Network, June, 2013.

¹⁷ Grier, November, 2014.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

It is important to note that the Houston Housing Authority played an active role in The Way Home. Housing authorities can often be the single largest providers of affordable housing in any community. The Houston Housing Authority prioritized homeless Veterans for its voucher program, providing quickly accessible resources for The Way Home's goals. To fully integrate their resources, the Houston Housing Authority participated in the Homeless Management Information System ("HMIS") data sharing, which is not required by HUD, but was vital for The Way Home's coordinated access. Mark Thiele, Vice President of the Houston Housing Authority ("HHA") housing choice voucher program not only provided resources, but in an effort to build solidarity, also led many meetings of The Way Home, which sometimes had over 100 attendees present.²⁰

Houston participated in a second acceleration boot camp in April 2013, this time joining the 100,000 Homes Campaign. The 100,000 Homes Campaign was launched nationwide in 2010 by Community Solutions, a national non-profit. The Campaign's goal was to house 100,000 homeless families and communities across America, which it achieved in July 2014.²¹ Houston's goal with the second Boot Camp was to use every HUD-VASH voucher available in Houston. The Coalition for the Homeless at Houston/Harris County ("CFTH") reported:

"Immediately after the boot camp, more than 160 volunteers gathered to participate in Registry Week through the 100,000 Homes Campaign. Volunteers interviewed nearly 1,000 homeless individuals and identified 180 Veterans through this effort... These efforts resulted in 347 homeless Veterans placed in permanent housing in 100 days."²²

To keep the momentum going, Houston also participated in the 25 Cities Initiative, which was a federal initiative for 25 communities to "accelerat[e] and align[] their existing efforts toward the creation of coordinated assessment and entry systems, laying the foundation for ending all homelessness, including homelessness among Veterans, in these communities."²³ Houston received a letter from the USICH, HUD, and VA in early 2014 stating: "The purpose of this letter is to invite you - along with 24 other communities - to be part of an effort to pioneer the creation of such coordinated systems, and to use these systems to end Veteran and chronic homelessness in your community by 2015. Customized to your community's current efforts and challenges, our collaborative efforts will prioritize data-driven, evidence-based solutions that rapidly connect Veterans to homelessness prevention services, permanent housing, health care, jobs, and other supportive services."²⁴ Houston accepted the 25 Cities Initiative at the same time that it accepted the Mayors Challenge to End Veteran homelessness.²⁵

²⁰ Thiele, August 28, 2015.

²¹ Community Solutions, 2012.

²² Coalition for the Homeless of Houston/Harris County, June, 2015.

²³ 25 Cities, 2014.

²⁴ Shinseki, Donovan, and Poppe, February 21, 2014.

²⁵ Grier, August 4-8, 2016.

Houston worked to maximize its funding for activities that were deemed critical to the community. For example, the Supportive Services for Veterans Families Program (“SSVF”) was not used only as a bridge or “stop gap” until the Veteran received the HUD-VASH; instead, the SSVF supportive housing component was fully utilized for rapid re-housing. Rapid re-housing works to provide assistance to individuals and families that are homeless by housing and stabilizing them. Furthermore, in order to align the funding with the community goals, the CFTH decided not to renew its HUD grant of Shelter + Care, which had provided rental assistance with supportive housing. HUD had already begun the process of phasing out Shelter + Care for the CoC Program and the match for Shelter + Care was difficult to meet. Instead of Shelter + Care, the CFTH maximized its staff resources by applying for more rapid re-housing funds through the CoC Program.²⁶ Rapid re-housing could also be used as a bridge until the Veteran received HUD-VASH.

To give a full array of needed services, at least one SSVF provider also administers a Homeless Veteran Reintegration Program (“HVRP”). In the HVRP, the Department of Labor Program funds local workforce development boards, local public agencies, nonprofit organizations, and tribal governments to provide homeless Veterans occupational, classroom and on-the-job training, as well as job search and placement assistance.²⁷

In its annual PIT count in January 2014, volunteers identified 644 Veterans experiencing homelessness in Houston, which was down from 877 Veterans experiencing homelessness in 2013.²⁸ To support the national initiatives of 100,000 Homes Campaign, the priority communities, and the Mayors challenge, the VA released an additional \$507 million for the SSVF Program nationwide in the summer of 2014. The grants included “surge”²⁹ funding for 56 high-need communities, which included Houston.³⁰

During a visit in August 2015, TDHCA and TVC staff noted that several members of The Way Home discussed the importance of Mayor Annise Parker’s support and the political capital The Way Home received as a result of the acceptance of the Mayors Challenge in 2014.

TDHCA and TVC staff encountered a sense of teamwork and camaraderie among the participants of The Way Home. Staff attended a meeting of Housing Houston’s Heroes, a subcommittee of The Way Home that focused on ending homelessness among Veterans led by Mark Thiele. The approximately 30 attendees spent almost one hour acknowledging the work of staff members and relating success stories of homeless Veterans, who were housed or received services as a result of The Way Home. For example, Barbara Irving, Director of Veteran and Housing Services at Career and Recovery Resource Center (“CRRC”), relayed a story of one of CRRC’s employees, Cheryl Turner (Veteran Service Provider) locating housing for 10 Veterans. The 10 Veterans had received welcome baskets from one of The Way Home’s partner agencies, Harris County’s Community

²⁶ Thibaudeau, August 27, 2015.

²⁷ Department of Labor, June 23, 2015.

²⁸ United States Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2014b.

²⁹ United States Department of Veterans Affairs, September 30, 2014.

³⁰ United States Veterans Affairs, September 30, 2014.

Services by Linda Hudson (Public Relations Manager). While the welcome baskets provided essential household items, the Veterans still needed beds, chairs and tables. CRRC reached out to Martha and Aris Macris, who are supporters and financial contributors to 'The Way Home. The Marcis' were in the process of buying a corporate property filled with furniture so they allowed CRRC to take the Veterans to the property and select furniture, which CCRC moved into the Veterans' new homes.

Several of the attendees also related that some meetings of Housing Houston's Heroes were characterized by vigorous debate. Toni Brown, HCHV Deputy Director at the Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center described the meetings as aligning with Bruce Tuckman's stages of group development: forming, storming, norming, and performing. After several meetings, one priority population was agreed upon: Veterans experiencing chronic homelessness.

Eva Thibaudeau, Director of Programs for CFTH, stressed the need to create a sense of urgency to end Veteran homelessness. Gary Grier, Project Manager for CFTH, echoed that a sense of urgency was vital to the initiative. He laid out three steps: (1) have the right people in the room, (2) meet in a new location to set a different environment, and (3) create a sense of importance and urgency. Mr. Grier posited these three steps would lead to the development of a joint goal.³¹ Mandy Chapman Semple, Special Assistant to the Mayor of Houston for Homeless Initiatives, stressed that the goals needed to be measurable. She described a model which demonstrated that the homeless population could be dynamic, illustrating a reduction in the population to zero when resources were added.³² Thibaudeau added that, in her view, housing was the "ultimate resource",³³ most likely because of the scarcity of affordable housing or availability of housing for higher-risk tenants.

³¹ Grier, November, 2014.

³² Chapman Semple, March 2, 2016.

³³ Thibaudeau, August 27, 2015.