

No More Homeless Vets in Merced

Ending Homelessness among Unsheltered Veterans in Merced County: The Number of Unsheltered Veterans is less but what will it take to finish the job?

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The primary purpose of this report is to focus on the following formalized question—what types of housing, resources, and tactics are essential to finish the job of ending homelessness among veterans in Merced County?

The multi-faceted answer is first outlined as follows:

- Direct the HUD-VASH voucher program, which combines Housing Choice Voucher (HCV) rental assistance for eligible homeless Veterans with case management and clinical services provided by the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), towards chronically homeless veterans and particularly for those who are the most visibly homeless, hardest-to-reach, and most likely to die on the streets;
- Use the Housing First and a “low barrier” approach while implementing the HUD-VASH voucher program. The Housing First approach focuses on providing permanent supportive housing as quickly as possible and then providing home-based supportive services, instead of requiring veterans to earn their housing by first entering shelters and meeting the program criteria with the likelihood of being discharged back to the streets;
- Direct the Supportive Services for Veteran Families (SSVF) Program, which provides outreach and case management services and assists eligible veterans to obtain VA benefits and other public benefits, towards non-chronically homeless veterans and chronically homeless when appropriate;
- Use the Rapid Rehousing best practice while implementing the Supportive Services for Veteran Families (SSVF) Program, which helps families and individuals quickly move out of homelessness and into affordable permanent housing, by providing services that help them obtain and maintain their housing such as housing search and landlord negotiation, short-term financial and rental assistance, and the delivery of home-based housing stabilization services as needed;
- Provide bridge housing, which is different from shelter that requires participants to earn their housing by meeting and maintaining program criteria. A Housing First and Low Barrier approach is implemented to rapidly rehouse and prevent participants from being discharged to the streets while receiving HUD-VASH voucher and SSVF program assistance during their stay in bridge housing;
- Provide housing navigation services to participants who are receiving HUD-VASH voucher and SSVF program assistance during their stay in bridge housing;
- HUD-VASH voucher and SSVF program assistance is largely focused on the City of Merced because a significant majority of unsheltered veterans in the County are living on the city’s streets.

1. Number of unsheltered veterans

The results of the 2016 Merced County Homeless Count and Subpopulation Survey revealed very good news concerning unsheltered veterans living on local streets. As noted in the table below, 25 homeless veterans were counted in 2016 whereas the estimated number of homeless veterans in 2015 was 88. This represents a decrease of 63 veterans or 71.5%.

Table 1. Comparison of total Number of Homeless Veterans

Year of Homeless Count	Total Number of Homeless Veterans	Variance	
		#	%
2015	88	-	-
2016	25	63	71.5

Of the 25 homeless veterans, 20 were counted on the street as unsheltered and five (5) were temporarily living in local shelters and transitional housing programs.

2. What will it take to finish the job?

Over the years, many homeless service providers have successfully helped homeless persons (including veterans) who qualified for their programs by meeting the screening criteria that was established to enter and finish their programs. Such criteria included being single or part of a family; being male or female; agreeing to, and maintaining, sobriety; having income; participating in a money management plan, etc.

As a result, those homeless persons who met and fulfilled program criteria often obtained permanent housing. Those persons who did not meet the criteria and were screened out, and those who met the screening criteria but were unable to maintain the criteria, were left languishing on the streets and often became the most visible homeless and hardest-to-reach and are known to us today as the chronically homeless.

In order to finish the job of ending homelessness among veterans, the following action steps will be taken for each subpopulation of veterans:

Chronically Homeless Veterans

Finding: Of the 20 homeless veterans counted during the Point-in-Time Count, 11 or 55% were chronically homeless.

The appropriate intervention for all chronically homeless persons including veterans is subsidized permanent supportive housing with case management services that is obtained and maintained through a Housing First and Low Barrier approach.

This approach was recently outlined by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) during the 2015 Continuum of Care (CoC) Homeless Assistance Program grant application process by asking two specific questions.

A. Low Barriers

The first question, which focused on barriers that prevent potential participants from entering permanent housing including permanent supportive housing, was

“Based on the CoC's FY 2015 new and renewal project applications, what percentage of Permanent Housing (permanent supportive housing and rapid rehousing) . . . projects in the CoC are low barrier?”¹

HUD noted that this meant “. . . they do not screen out potential participants based on those clients possessing

- too little or little income,
- active or history of substance use,
- criminal record, with exceptions for state-mandated restrictions, and
- history of having been or currently a victim of domestic violence (e.g., lack of a protective order, period of separation from abuser, or law enforcement involvement).”²

HUD further stated that

“Many recipients of CoC Program and ESG Program funds place more stringent requirements for entry into a program than what HUD requires and this can create barriers for those homeless persons who already have the most barriers and who would be considered the hardest-to-serve. As we continue to shift toward a paradigm of ending homelessness, it is increasingly important that CoC Program-funded projects eliminate barriers to serving people experiencing homelessness.”³

Consequently, project applicants were asked to indicate their alignment with a low barrier philosophy by indicating that they were staying away from the following list of barriers,

¹ “Detailed Instructions for Completing the FY 2015 Continuum of Care (CoC) Application,” p. 62.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

- ☐ Too little or little income
- ☐ Active or history of substance use
- ☐ Criminal record, with exceptions for state-mandated restrictions, and
- ☐ History of having been or currently a victim of domestic violence (e.g., lack of a protective order, period of separation from abuser, or law enforcement involvement).

According to HUD, if project applicants checked all four boxes, the project was considered “low barrier.” If less than four boxes were checked, the project was not considered low barrier.

B. Housing First

The second question, which focused on Housing First, was

What percentage of CoC Program-funded Permanent Supportive Housing (PSH), RRH, SSO (non-Coordinated Entry) and Transitional Housing (TH) FY 2015 Projects have adopted a Housing First approach, meaning that the project quickly houses clients without preconditions or service participation requirements?

HUD stated that

*“Housing First is an approach to quickly and successfully connect individuals and families experiencing homelessness to permanent housing without preconditions and barriers to entry, such as sobriety, treatment, or service participation requirements. See the *Housing First Policy Brief* for further description of Housing First. Research has shown that permanent supportive housing models that use a Housing First approach are highly effective for ending homelessness, particularly for people experiencing chronic homelessness who have higher service needs.”*⁴

HUD further stated that

“The Housing First model is an approach to: 1) quickly and successfully connect individuals and families experiencing homelessness to permanent supportive housing; 2) without barriers to entry, such as sobriety, treatment or service participation requirements; or 3) related preconditions that might lead to the program participant’s termination from the project. Supportive services are offered to maximize housing

⁴ Ibid., p. 64.

stability and prevent returns to homelessness as opposed to addressing predetermined treatment goals prior to permanent housing entry.”⁵

Project applicants provided their responses based on the following three questions, which included specific instructions from HUD:

- **“Does the project quickly move participants into permanent housing?** Select ‘Yes’ to this question if your project will quickly move program participants into permanent housing without intermediary steps or a period of qualification before permanent housing. Select ‘No’ if the project does not work to move program participants quickly into permanent housing.”
- **“Has the project removed the following barriers to accessing housing and services? (Select ALL that apply):** Check the box next to each item to confirm that your project has removed (or never had) barriers to program access related to each of the following: 1) Having too little or little income; 2) Active or history of substance abuse; 3) Having a criminal record with exceptions for state-mandated restrictions; and 4) Fleeing domestic violence (e.g., lack of a protective order, period of separation from abuser, or law enforcement involvement). If all of these barriers to access still exist, select None of the above’.”
- **“Has the project removed the following as reasons for program termination?** Check the box next to each item to confirm that your project has removed (or never had) reasons for program participant termination related to each of the following: 1) Failure to participate in supportive services; 2) Failure to make progress on a service plan; 3) Loss of income or failure to improve income; 4) Fleeing domestic violence; and 5) Any other activity not covered in a lease agreement typically found in the project’s geographic area. If all of these reasons for program termination still exist select ‘None of the above’.”

If the answers were affirmative to each of the questions, the following question “Does the project follow a Housing First approach” was automatically populated as “yes.” HUD also noted that

“This field is automatically calculated and cannot be edited. **Only if** “Yes” was answered for 4a **AND** all of the barriers and reasons boxes were checked for 4b and 4c, **will** this field indicate “Yes” to confirm a Housing First approach. Otherwise, this field will indicate “No” to confirm that the project will not follow a Housing First approach.”⁶

⁵ For renewal applications see “Detailed Instructions for Completing the Renewal Project Application: Fiscal Year 2015 Continuum of Care Program Application Process,” p. 17 and for new applications see “Detailed Instructions for Completing the New Project Application: Fiscal Year 2015 Continuum of Care Program Application Process,” p. 19.

⁶ Ibid, p. 20.

The HUD-VASH voucher program combines Housing Choice Voucher (HCV) rental assistance for homeless Veterans with case management and clinical services provided by the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). Thus, any new HUD-VASH vouchers or any existing units supported by HUD-VASH vouchers that become vacant should be directed towards homeless veterans who are eligible for VA services.

Homeless veterans not eligible for VA services will be referred to any new permanent supportive housing or any existing permanent supportive housing units that become vacant for possible placement.

Non-Chronically Homeless Veterans

Finding: Of the 20 homeless veterans counted during the Point-in-Time Count, 9 or 45% were not chronically homeless.

The Merced City and County CoC should continue to work closely WestCare California's San Joaquin Valley Veterans (SJVV) program, which has received funding from the VA to implement a Supportive Services for Veteran Families (SSVF) Program in Merced County that directs assistance to chronically homeless and non-chronically homeless veterans. The program provides outreach and case management services and assists eligible veterans to obtain VA benefits and other public benefits, which may include:

- Vocational and rehabilitation counseling;
- Employment and training service;
- Educational assistance;
- Health care services;
- Daily living services;
- Personal financial planning services;
- Transportation services;
- Income support services;
- Fiduciary and representative payee services;
- Legal services;
- Child care services;
- Housing counseling services; and
- Other supportive services, including time-limited payments to third parties (e.g., temporary financial assistance payments on behalf of Veteran families to landlords, utility companies, moving companies, and eligible child care providers) provided these payments help Veteran families remain in permanent housing or obtain permanent housing.

C. Bridge Housing

Bridge housing is temporary housing that is different from shelters that require participants to earn their housing by meeting and maintaining program criteria. Bridge housing requires participants to adhere to basic health and safety issues. However, bridge housing includes a Housing First and Low Barrier approach that prevents participants from being discharged to the streets because of the reasons noted in subsections A and B above.

Thus, if an unsheltered veteran qualifies for HUD-VASH or SSVF program assistance, the veteran is placed in bridge housing while a Housing Navigator identifies appropriate permanent housing as quickly as possible so that the veteran can receive home-based case management and supportive services in order to help the veteran maintain the housing.

D. Housing Navigation

Housing navigation consists of two primary activities: compiling an inventory of existing and new permanent housing units and moving veterans into the units as quickly as possible.

A Housing Navigator position needs to be created and funded in order to carry out the two primary activities. A Housing Navigator responsibilities should include

- Recruiting property owners and managers;
- Completing intake documentation;
- Assessing housing barriers, needs, and preferences;
- Matching appropriate housing resources (HUD-VASH, SSVF, S+C, CoC-PSH);
- Identifying and matching available housing units with homeless veterans;
- Setting up appointments to see available housing units;
- Assisting with transportation for homeless veterans to see available units;
- Assisting with submitting rental applications and understanding leases;
- Assisting with obtaining utilities and making moving arrangements; and
- Conducting follow-up to ensure veterans are maintaining housing.

E. Tactics

The primary tactics should be three-fold: 1) directing the resources; 2) ensuring accountability; and 3) rapidly rehousing any veterans who become homeless in the future.

Directing the resources

Directing the resources should include the following:

- HUD-VASH vouchers should be directed to chronically homeless veterans who are living on the streets and the most visibly homeless, hardest-to-reach, and likely to die on the streets;
- SSVF program assistance should be directed towards the non-chronically homeless veterans and chronically homeless persons if appropriate; and
- HUD-VASH vouchers and SSVF program assistance should be primarily but not solely directed towards the City of Merced because 18 of the 20 (90%) of unsheltered veterans who were recently counted were counted in the City of Merced.

Ensuring accountability

Ensuring accountability should include the following:

- The recommendations in this report should be implemented and evaluated by the No More Homeless Veterans in Merced Task Force;
- Task Force should provide findings and recommendations to the Merced City and County CoC Board of Directors at each Board of Directors meeting and at each quarterly CoC Representatives meeting.

Rapidly rehousing any veterans who become homeless in the future

Any veterans who become homeless in the future should be quickly placed in permanent housing by implementing the housing first, low barrier, bridge housing, and housing navigation approach outlined above within 30 days of becoming homeless. The 30-day mark is encouraged by HUD within the Homeless Emergency Assistance and Rapid Transition to Housing (HEARTH Act): Continuum of Care Program Interim Rule which codified into law the Continuum of Care Program.