ABOUT HOMELESSNESS AMONG VETERANS

• VA and its federal, state, local, and nongovernmental partners recognize that ending Veteran homelessness is not a single event in time, but rather a deliberate ongoing effort toward achieving and maintaining the goal of ending homelessness among Veterans.

• The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development’s annual point-in-time estimate of America’s homeless population found that fewer than 40,000 Veterans were experiencing homelessness (including those living on the street or in a shelter, temporary safe haven, or any place unfit for habitation) on a given night in January 2016. The January 2016 estimate found just over 13,000 unsheltered homeless Veterans actually living on the streets, a 56 percent decrease since 2010.

• VA’s National Center on Homelessness Among Veterans (NCHAV), established in 2009, works to promote recovery-oriented care for Veterans who are homeless or at risk for homelessness by developing and disseminating evidence-based policies, programs and best practices.

• The Domiciliary Care for Homeless Veterans program has been providing medical services to disadvantaged Veterans since the close of the Civil War.

• The National Call Center for Homeless Veterans (1-877-4AID-VET) is staffed by trained responders providing support and resources to Veterans and their families who lack secure housing. Live chat with trained responders is available at the Veterans Crisis Line website.

VA RESEARCH ON HOMELESSNESS: OVERVIEW

• VA research looks at the causes and risks of homelessness among Veterans, and ways to prevent Veterans from becoming homeless.

• Researchers help develop interventions to improve homeless Veterans’ health and provide resources and training to professionals working on their behalf.

• VA researchers have helped VA implement the Housing First approach, which aims to get homeless people into safe, stable housing even if they are still coping with substance use or mental health issues.

SELECTED MILESTONES AND MAJOR EVENTS

1987 – Initiated the Northeast Program Evaluation Center (NEPEC) to serve homeless Veterans

1991 – Established that, in Vietnam Veterans, there does not appear to be a causal relation between homelessness and military service, including exposure to combat

2013 – Determined there is an association between homelessness among Veterans and childhood problems such as abuse and family instability

2015 – Learned that 30 percent of female and 9 percent of male homeless Veterans have children in their custody

2015 – Found that Veterans who had been discharged from the military for misconduct had dramatically higher rates of homelessness than those who left under normal circumstances

RECENT STUDIES: SELECTED HIGHLIGHTS

• VA’s Housing First mode of care enables people who have not yet achieved sobriety or are still exhibiting symptoms of mental health problems to receive permanent housing through government-funded rental vouchers. A survey of nearly 100 VA employees, taken by researchers at the Birmingham VA Medical Center, found that front-line staff faced challenges in housing homeless Veterans quickly because of difficult rental markets, the need to coordinate with local public housing authorities, and a lack of available funds for move-in costs. They also found,
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however, that 80 to 90 percent of Veterans housed in this program were able to remain in that housing. (Psychiatric Services, May 1, 2014)

• Many people living on the streets prioritize having a mobile phone, to give them an identity and a way of communicating with the world. Researchers from VA's Center for Healthcare Organization and Implementation Research in Bedford, Massachusetts, interviewed 109 Veterans in a variety of that state's homeless programs. They found that 89 percent of those surveyed owned a mobile phone, and 76 percent used the Internet. Of those with phones, 93 percent were interested in receiving either text messages or phone calls about upcoming medical appointments, and 88 percent wanted to be asked by phone if they would like to schedule an appointment if they had not been seen by a health care provider in over a year. (Telemedicine Journal and E-Health, September 2014)

• VA medical centers that have successfully implemented Housing First share several significant characteristics, according to Birmingham VA researchers. The leaders of successful medical centers join front-line staff in the work of finding acceptable housing; elevate people knowledgeable about homelessness into senior leadership positions; and work to resolve logistical challenges. They also help ensure that work groups dealing with homelessness are properly aligned and integrated into their organizations. (Journal of General Internal Medicine, December 2014)

• Both male and female Veterans are at greater risk for homelessness than their non-Veteran counterparts, although the disparity has declined over time. According to researchers with the VA Connecticut Health Care System and Yale University, this disparity is most prominent among Veterans of the all-volunteer force—those who signed up for the armed services after July 1, 1973, when the draft was eliminated. The researchers stated that Veterans appear to have many of the same major risk factors for homelessness as other adults, with the strongest and most consistent ones being substance abuse, severe mental illness, and low income. (Epidemiologic Reviews, 2015)

• Homeless Veterans are infected with HIV, the virus that causes AIDS, at least three times more often than the rest of the U.S. population. A study led by researchers at the VA Greater Los Angeles Healthcare System repeatedly visited three Los Angeles shelters to provide AIDS testing, results, and follow-up if necessary to Veterans and other residents. The team believes that given the high costs and health risks of untreated HIV infection, the program’s cost of $48.95 per client tested is cost-effective and could significantly reduce HIV rates among homeless Veterans. (American Journal of Public Health, January 2015)

• Veterans who had been discharged from the military between 2001 and 2012 for misconduct had dramatically higher rates of homelessness than those who left under normal circumstances, a study by researchers with VA’s Salt Lake City Health Care System and NCHAV has found. Overall, 1 percent of VA patients were homeless at some point within a year of their discharge, but 5.4 percent of those discharged for misconduct fell in that category. Misconduct is defined as a discharge related to drug use, alcoholism, offenses against the military code of conduct, infractions of the law, or other misbehaviors. (Journal of the American Medical Association, Aug. 25, 2015)

For more information on VA studies on homelessness and other key topics relating to Veterans’ health, please visit www.research.va.gov/topics