

# **EVH - Bonus - A Fireside Chat with Greater Los Angeles on VA's One Team Approach**

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**Shawn Liu:** Welcome to Ending Veteran Homelessness, your firsthand look into our nation's efforts to ensure that every Veteran has a safe and stable place to call home. From the Department of Veterans Affairs, Homeless Programs Office, I'm your host, Shawn Liu.

If you're a Veteran who's homeless or at risk of homelessness, reach out. Call the National Call Center for Homeless Veterans at 877-424-3838. Trained counselors are standing by to help 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. That [00:01:00] number again is 877-424-3838.

Hey everybody, Shawn here, we've got an extra episode for you this month. Hopefully it will land for you. It's going to be a little bit more technical. Many of you know that this year, this calendar year we've been focusing on our big goals. We set three goals this year for 2023. That we would house 38,000 more homeless Veterans this year building on our success of housing over 40,000 Veterans last year in 2022. That we would prevent those Veterans from returning to homelessness. That we would get them rehoused or placed back on a path to rehousing if they did fall back into homelessness after we housed them. And then of course engaging with at least 28,000 unsheltered Veterans during the course of this year.

To help us succeed in this goal and make sure that we're delivering more housing and more benefits to more Veterans than ever [00:02:00] before this year, we've been focusing on something that we've been calling our One Team Approach.

Basically, it's this idea and this framework that we've been deploying across the country to enhance coordination and unify all of our actions towards the joint mission of ending Veteran homelessness.

Now this approach, it uses a lot of different principles, including Housing First principles. And we're planning to do an episode on Housing First at the beginning of the New Year. So it's using a lot of these principles to make sure that regardless of where a Veteran enters our system, regardless of what program they first get connected to, or what organization, whether it's VA or maybe it's a local charity or nonprofit in your community, that they still get connected and are matched to a coordinated, holistic and tailored housing and service solution that is centered on their choice, their preferences, their needs, and their goals for themselves. And again, as I mentioned, we are operationalizing this, which is this fancy government jargon speak for we're [00:03:00] actually like implementing this at VA Homeless Programs across the country.

So for this special episode, we're giving you basically a version of an interview that took place on October 10th. It was with the leaders at the VA Greater Los Angeles Healthcare System, specifically about how they're implementing One Team across Los Angeles.

Now a couple little caveats, because many of you are Veterans. You are members of the public. This interview was done for some of our national leadership training and strategic planning. So it leaves in a lot of the alphabet soup and the jargon that we normally try to demystify and tease out on this podcast. So it's going to be a little bit technical. But still we kind of thought that would be value for you to hear, because it's a really great example of both the technical side, but also the relationship side and the partnership side of implementing our One Team Approach towards the goal of ending Veteran homelessness.

So without further [00:04:00] ado, I'm going to give you this interview featuring Doug Tetrault from the Technical Assistance Collaborative. He's interviewing Mr. John Kuhn, the Deputy Director of the VA Greater Los Angeles Healthcare System. And Sally Hammitt, the Chief of Community Engagement and Re-integration Services at GLA. So we hope that this lands for you. We hope that you enjoy it. Thanks so much. And without further ado here they are.

**Douglas Tetrault:**

Welcome to our fireside chat with John Kuhn and Sally Hammitt. My name is Doug Tetrault. I'm with the Technical Assistance Collaborative. We're one of the TA providers that is supporting the VA's work. And we are joined today by John and Sally. John is the Deputy Director of the VA Greater Los Angeles Healthcare System, or GLA. Sally Hammitt is the Chief of Community Engagement and Reintegration service at GLA. And we welcome them today to talk a little bit about the work they've been doing out in the Los Angeles area focused on implementing the One Team Approach.

Before we get into some of the conversation, John, would you like to introduce yourself to the group a little bit?

**John Kuhn:** Sure. So, I've been the Deputy Director here for the [00:05:00] past year. Prior to that I was the National Director of SSVF, and that's who I am.

**Douglas Tetrault:** Great. Welcome John and Sally, would you introduce yourself a little bit?

**Sally Hammitt:** Hi everyone. I'm excited to be the Chief of our Homeless Programs here at Greater Los Angeles. I'm not new to the Homeless Programs. My entire VA career, primarily was in Homeless Programs in VASH, street outreach, Veteran Justice Outreach. And then I directed Homeless Programs in Cincinnati, Ohio.

And then I stepped away a little bit and was the Chief of Social Work here at Greater Los Angeles, and so I'm thrilled to be back as the Chief of the Homeless Programs here.

**Douglas Tetrault:** Great. Well, thank you both for taking the time to do this. We're excited to speak with you. We're gonna jump right in. Again, focus on this One Team Approach. Kind of starting with you, John. VA has embraced this concept of quote unquote One Team now, as part of its overall national strategy, focus on the 2022 and 2023 homeless goals, and housing goals, but also the broader effort to end homelessness among Veterans that's been underway for a number of years now.

At the [00:06:00] local and individual level, though, I think different people have different perceptions of what that One Team really means. Could you describe GLA's vision or how you might articulate what it means to implement a One Team Approach and how VA's National Goals have helped shape that for locally.

**John Kuhn:** Of course, Doug. And I think it's important to understand the historical context for One Team, because it really is an evolution from what we've developed. VA has rolled out a number of initiatives and programs that has reduced homelessness by half.

But now that we are at this point and we have this list of different VA programs, I think what we need to do a better job of is making all these different initiatives are integrated in a way that makes sense for the Veteran. So rather than initiatives that are program-focused so that a Veteran's certain needs are met by a certain program, we see this holistically. That the Veteran has a complex set of needs and we need to be able to adjust our services and [00:07:00] plans based on the Veteran's needs, not what a particular program's offering or where that Veteran shows up.

So One Team is an effort to integrate these different services in a meaningful way. Not just simply handoffs, but really integrated services so we are all planning together to best meet the Veteran's needs.

**Douglas Tetrault:** Sort of the natural piggyback, I think goes to your role, Sally. So John talks about this integration of services. And one of the major steps to getting there and making gains toward that is really building an infrastructure that brings together and promotes those cross program partnerships.

We know that systems traditionally inside, outside, and across VA and community partners can be siloed. Before we talk more about the actual infrastructure of how you operationalize this, can you talk, Sally, a little bit about what's worked, maybe things that haven't worked when it comes to bringing in those partners in VA within VA, and even outside of VA to to pull this effort together?

**Sally Hammitt:** Sure. We have so many people who [00:08:00] contribute to the success of housing Veterans. And so having VA be the sole decision makers regarding the development of any process, particularly One Team, doesn't work. And, we know through experience that siloed services create a lot of duplication in services.

But what does work is bringing others to the table. And creating a structure and a leadership committee where all of our partners come together and can contribute to our success. You know, we did that strategically with our one team, and what we recognize as a result is we're stronger. We understand the importance of demonstrating flexibility. Our geography is incredibly wide and

some of the areas are more resource rich than others. So that cookie cutter approach does not work for us. In fact, what we recognize is in a lot of our outlying areas, we often require very different strategies to ensure success.

Our One Team launch, includes so many [00:09:00] community partners. And we really capitalized on that commitment and dedication, because all of our partners really contribute to our success.

**John Kuhn:** I think one of the things that I really wanted to underline what Sally just said is the strength of those community partners. We see again and again how those community partners, the way they're embedded in the broader community, means that they can leverage other resources.

They're able to bring things to the table and a perspective to the table that the VA doesn't necessarily have. VA has a lot of clinical strengths. We certainly have resources. And paired together, we really have a collective strength that's much greater than our individual strengths.

**Sally Hammitt:** One of my favorite statements in my work in the Homeless Programs is, "VA cannot do this alone." And we know that.

**Douglas Tetrault:** Well, an interesting challenge, Sally that I think you all have been working to tackle that. We know there's always challenges working with program staff, program leaders to really understand who can do what within a system. Where is SSVF's position and what services do they offer? What's offered and [00:10:00] where are the strengths the VA brings to the table? What maybe are not your strengths that you need the community? And even how different types of programs, your interim housing programs, your permanent housing programs, may work together. There's a lot, kind of, in the mix there that has to be clarified. Not to mention some of the other key partners in the room, VJP and your DOL friends. Can you speak a little bit about how, throughout GLA, training is conducted or when policy decisions are made about how things are prioritized or new services are being offered, how that's communicated? Kind of those five W's: who can do what with whom and when?

**Sally Hammitt:** I think what's really cool about One Team is that One Team allows VA and our partners to lean into the expertise of one another.

If you look over my shoulder, you'll see the HRO principles, and one of those principles is Deference to Expertise. We created a tri chair structure in One

Team. And that consists of a VA individual, that's me, someone from our LA County Military and Veteran Affairs, and an SSVF grantee.

And as a [00:11:00] rollout of those chairs, we also have a leadership committee. We've got about 75 people that come to the table every week. And what we're recognizing is that our community is letting us know what barriers need to be busted, what supports they need, what resources they need. And through that lens of transparency, we're able to come together and create a training approach for our team. And so one of the things we've built into One Team is being able to offer interactive, productive, and consistent trainings to not just our leadership committee, but all of those that are our frontline workers. We have PHAs at the table. Sometimes we'll bring in legal resources to the table.

And through all of these programs, we're able to ensure that we're committing to one another to learn more about each other's programs.

**Douglas Tetrault:** I'd like to just piggyback that a moment, Sally. It feels like there's a lot of folks that are being empowered, right? To give voice to what they need within the system. Can you go a little bit deeper into the leadership structure? And also, [00:12:00] you know, you have 75 people at the table. You're bringing in feedback from different partners that may not always be aligned. How has that informed the way you make decisions or any hints for other larger communities across the country that also have very maybe vocal and involved provider networks and leadership structures and trying to be able to still kind of get things done while also trying to respect and bring in those voices as best you can?

**Sally Hammitt:** The leadership structure was really strategic because what I've recognized as a leader in Homeless Programs is that we can't get the work done if the VA's calling all the shots. Especially in a system where we need to leverage the supports and partnerships of others. We recognize that our systems are very different. First of all, we have data systems that don't talk to one another and we have to be talking about things that are going on. I think one thing that I think was really important in creating that structure and that leadership is ensuring that someone with lived experience was a member of that leadership team.

So someone who has experienced homelessness and is a Veteran. [00:13:00] Coming to the table with that lens of lived experience is really important to us. When we face barriers as a community, what I've noticed is that when people



aren't in the room, at times, there's a tendency to point fingers at those who aren't at the table.

And so we try to get rid of all of that right away. We try to bring everybody into the table so there's a proactive way of solving our problems as a community. And not pointing fingers and calling blame out, but really actually breaking barriers together.

And when we don't understand why someone's stuck in the process of getting housed, we call in those experts. And we ask their teams to stand up with us to ensure our best performance improvement ideas are coming from those who are doing the important face-to-face work with Veterans every day.

**Douglas Tetrault:** I like how you highlighted just sort of the, you know, you can see that finger pointing happen right? The communication barriers can break down. I mean, John, you know, I've worked with you for a number of years now, and we've all heard those common concerns and [00:14:00] challenges. Given all of the challenges we see nationally that are even heightened and more intense within the LA area, the staffing challenges coming out of COVID, the housing market that we're seeing right now, how do you continue to push forward with getting Veterans into housing?

**John Kuhn:** Well, I think we can't minimize the impact of some of these issues if the affordable housing crisis is real. Some of these macroeconomic challenges we face are not going away. But that said, doesn't mean we sit on our hands accept that we have these headwinds that we are facing.

Yes, we're facing these headwinds, but we're not powerless against it. Whether you're hired by SSVF or HUD-VASH or any of these programs, I think historically what happens is a staff person hired by, I'll take SSVF since I was doing that for so long, identifies with SSVF, "I now work for SSVF." And the reality is it should be, "I work for the Veteran." That change in focus is a real one. So we don't think of ourselves as just working for SSVF or [00:15:00] HUD-VASH or GPD or any other program, but we're working for the Veteran and we just happen to have a bit more knowledge about this particular set of resources.

A key principle of One Team is that we are regularly sitting down, either virtually or real terms at a table together, working together to address the needs of every Veteran that we're serving. In the old days, I think what would happen is the program would exhaust its resources and when it couldn't do anymore,

would reach out to the other program. The reasons for contacting other programs were often not for the best reasons.

The best reason is let's put together and assemble the kinds of service planning that makes sense for this Veteran to find and sustain permanent housing. That should be driving every discussion.

And One Team really allows us to do it. It brings subject matter experts in from all these different services who are all now working together for the Veteran, not just for their program. So that's where we start.

Then we also acknowledge we all face staffing constraints. The [00:16:00] capacity for all of our programs, particularly in LA, is very tough. It's a very expensive area. It's not just expensive for Veterans experiencing homelessness. It's expensive for staff. And we know social service staff typically are not among the best paid and as a result it's often difficult to recruit. So we're looking at providers who are understaffed.

So how do we address that?

Well, we try to be more efficient. So instead of HUD-VASH, and SSVF, and GPD each doing everything, we ask them to do what they're best at. So we ask SSVF, "You guys do the navigation." We ask HUD-VASH, "You guys do the clinical services after placement." And GPD, "You concentrate on temporary housing." And by working together, not everybody doing everything, we can assemble the resources in a way that make more sense, more efficient. We don't leave Veterans waiting. The last thing we wanna see is a Veteran waiting for services. The most dangerous place to be is unhoused. So we wanna make sure that we address that first. Then once we engage them in services, get them the [00:17:00] care they need. And of course, you know, really thoughtful housing plan that moves quickly to permanent housing.

**Sally Hammitt:** Committees were something that I wanted to mention as well. Just as we had an intentional look at who are the players at the table, we have work group committees that are set up in our One Team. One for example, By-name List Refinement, including case conferencing. Data and Performance. We have HUD-VASH-SSVF Collaboration. And Access and Triage. And the leaders of those committees, the chairs of those committees, are strategically VA paired with somebody in the community. So for example, SSVF and VASH has an SSVF grantee along with a VA staff member.



And that really highlights for us what are the needs of our frontline staff? What do they need to know about? What are they facing, what are the barriers and the challenges? And then those work group committees can come back to us and say, " We need some help in this area. We need our leadership committee to really lay out some policies and [00:18:00] procedures that are gonna help us tackle, for example, racial inequity."

And so we're in the process of developing that.

**Douglas Tetrault:** You know, a lot of the planning that you're speaking to here, Sally, is around data. And you mentioned in an earlier comment, you know, we have data systems that don't talk to each other that aren't easy to integrate. Even communication channels from VA to non-VA partners can be difficult to integrate. Can you speak a little bit more to any sort of data management or analysis? You mentioned the Racial Equity Committee coming out of some data review. Other data work that you're doing locally that's helping to drive some of your planning with your partners in this effort.

**Sally Hammitt:** Sure. You know, we've been really excited about the success that we've seen, particularly in the Calendar Year Goals. We've been really proud of that work and we've consistently asked the question, and John and I have talked about this too, " What is that about? Can we really say and can we show through data that One Team is really turning into raw numbers and we're really housing more individuals?"

As a committee, as a One Team committee, we're not sure exactly. But we were able [00:19:00] to get some assistance from HPO and the great data folks in VACO to really look at our data and recognize that we wanna make sure we have a quality by-name list. And do we have that? We recognize that our by-name list is captured in HMIS, but we really feel strongly that HOMES is a really great system. And so we need to be doing reconciliation on a regular basis to ensure that the people that we say need to be on that list, or are on that list, are.

So what we're finding is that we have people in HOMES that are housed, but they're still on our by-name list. Or we may have someone that's identified in HOMES as being unsheltered, but they're not on our by-name list. So LAHSA, our county, all of our teams are really working strategically. And what we know is that we need to share information on a regular basis.

One of the things that we've noticed, and we were really excited to see when we looked at, you know, percentage change and raw increase, we looked at January

through September. [00:20:00] We really saw an increase, a raw increase in VASH-only placements as compared to last year. We also saw a really big raw increase in SSVF placements.

Now, can I say for sure that that has something to do with One Team? Not necessarily, but I think it speaks volumes given all the efforts we've put into the HUD-VASH and the SSVF collaboration. I think we've seen other interesting percentage increases regarding shared programs. So shared programs with GPD, HCHV, and SSVF rapid rehousing.

We're really seeing some great gains there.

**John Kuhn:** So we know and have known for quite some time voucher utilization isn't what we would like to see. This is not just a VA phenomenon. In fact, in Los Angeles, there's just an article in the LA Times, something like 48% of all vouchers go unused. And there are multiple causes for this. One, paperwork, right? The public housing authority asked for a lot of information to be able to complete a Section 8 voucher. [00:21:00] This is based on HUD requirements. So we have successfully worked with PHAs and with HUD to get waivers to a lot of these requirements. That you can self-certify for a whole bunch of different things now. The 60-day time limit on the documentation now 120 days. So a lot of these things have been waived.

A second thing we know is that folks with Section 8 vouchers are routinely discriminated against. So one way we are trying to pursue a way around that is master leasing. In master leasing, what happens is a third party, let's say the Acme Social Service Organization, will rent 50 apartments from a variety of different landlords.

So as far as the landlord's concerned, it's Acme that's renting from them. But Acme then turns around and immediately a Veteran could move right in. They had the apartments available directly for move in without long waits, without a lot of paperwork demands. All the hoops that we typically associate with the voucher process go away.

Let data, let our experience and feedback from Veterans who are experiencing homelessness, feedback [00:22:00] from our providers inform decision making and drive the policies that we create. And drive the tools we make available to end this crisis.

**Sally Hammitt:** We're really lucky in our system to have HPO's assistance with the Racial Equity Dashboard and the data there. And I think One Team is really

excited about digging into that. Because we know that people who have traditionally and historically been marginalized, those are the individuals that we really wanna ensure we're getting out of old ways of doing business and making sure that our screening tools are not biased, and making sure that our admission and case management strategies really work to support Veterans in an equitable way.

**Douglas Tetrault:** Kind of for both of you, we know that... And this all sounds wonderful, right? But there are prob... There are still skeptics out there who may be listening to this. And you know, they're already overwhelmed. Whether they're in a leadership positions at the VA or even nationally or regionally within different offices. They may feel like we've done this before.

Kind of advice for others who are looking at this model and what feels good and different about this than maybe where we were [00:23:00] five years ago talking about coordinated entry.

Shawn Liu, the Director of Communications for HPO has called this sort of Coordinated Entry 2.0. And I wonder if one of you or both of you may just feel able to speak to maybe some of the skeptics in the room or kind of where you hope this goes moving forward into 2024.

**Sally Hammitt:** I've been accused of being all rainbows and sunshine. And I don't mind that actually because I got into this work because I believe that we can be successful. And I think one of the things that I love the most about working in Homeless Programs is knowing that I don't have to do it on my own.

I surround myself with people who are really smart. And they may work for the VA, they may work for other community partners. And so for people who think this is maybe more work or it's just that next best craze or next best thing. I mean, I think this makes our job easier, not more complex.

And you know, particularly coming off of three really tough years in a pandemic and recognizing that our teams are burnt out. And [00:24:00] they're tired and... Like they need something. They need something that's hopeful. I know it sounds you know, all rainbows and sunshine, but it's the right thing to do for the Veterans that we serve.

John, I always say like, "You're such an idea guy." And I never wanna lose that optimism that new ideas and different strategies work.

**John Kuhn:** I don't wanna minimize the amount of work here that's involved. Sally has done a masterful job at operationalizing, getting the different partners together in a meaningful way. It's one thing to talk about, it's another thing to actually do it. So you have to have people committed to organizing the different groups that are involved. Which is, you know, sometimes feels like herding cats. And those groups need to be facilitated by people with skill. And we are finding we need to invest in that. That's an area that's a challenge for us.

You have to be able to be willing to experiment. Not everything you're gonna do is gonna work the first time.[00:25:00]

There has to be a feedback group. It can't be all top down. There has to be feedback so you can continually improve the process.

Doug, you know so well from SSVF, our whole experience of building the plane while it's flying. That certainly applies here as well.

But we can't be frozen from moving ahead, waiting for everything to be perfect because of course that never happens. We just have to have enough information, enough data to make some informed decisions. Those decisions will change, I guarantee it. You know the situation in the community will change. We'll get hit by a recession. There'll be changes in funding. The kinds of issues our clients face, whether it's a fentanyl crisis or some other unexpected event, will change. And we'll have to be flexible and adaptable enough to continue to meet the needs of the Veterans in our community.

**Douglas Tetrault:** Before we get to any closing thoughts as we start to wrap up, both of you have spoken to this a little bit, like this idea of leadership, right? This discussion here we're hoping to bring [00:26:00] to other leaders, both at the VA medical centers, similar roles that you're in, as well as national and regional leadership. Any other tidbits that you wanna share about that importance of leaders like yourselves in LA moving things forward? Or if we think about Monica Diaz's role in really creating this idea that is being pushed throughout the country, how can you know the program offices, and Network Homeless Coordinators, and other VA Medical Center Directors and Community Engagement Specialists help lead the forefront, at least to get this started locally?

**John Kuhn:** You just have to start meeting. First at a leadership level and then break it down into those local groups that need to meet. We all have to remember, we're not working for program, we're working for the Veteran. And what does that mean in terms of developing the kinds of continuity of care and

planning that's going to help that Veteran find and sustain housing. You're not gonna find that in a program. You're going to find that in a collaboration where we can make these resources work in a way that makes sense, that's efficient, and is really outcome focused.

**Sally Hammitt:** You [00:27:00] know, when I was a Veteran Justice Outreach Specialist, I remember being at a conference and I don't know... I don't know who said it, but I'll never forget it. They said, "You are an ambassador for the VA."

I didn't really think about it in the way then that I think about it now, but I think this starts with me. It starts with John. It starts with our Homeless Program staff that are leaders throughout the country. And I think servant leadership is really important.

If I'm gonna be successful in what I'm trying to accomplish, I need to ensure that my staff, my team, my colleagues, are driving the decisions that we're making. And that I'm supporting and listening to them and advocating for them for what they need. Because they're the ones that help us innovate. They're the ones that show us what we do well and what we need to work on. And so that collective strength that we all hold together as one team is what I love about being in the Homeless Programs. You know, it's a culture that encourages participation through a lens of [00:28:00] curiosity and really empowering teams to do what they know works. And also challenge leaders to advocate for something different.

**Douglas Tetrault:** Thanks Sally, and thanks John. As we wrap up, any final thoughts or anything you wanted to highlight or reinforce from some of the conversation that we've had here today?

**John Kuhn:** We have a staff that has really embraced this. Change is always difficult. And it's not always right. Folks who say you're resistant to change. Well, sometimes there's a good reason to be resistant. So, I am so appreciative of the embrace our staff have had of this. And frankly, the leadership we've had. Sally embodies that leadership. And other staff that we have on who have really taken point on this running our committees.

Our community partners, who have been terrific. We have two other co-chairs. Chris Galbrath from SSVF and Jim Zenner from the community who have really done a remarkable job reinforcing this notion that it is a partnership. It takes a village, as has been said many times. And I [00:29:00] just wanna thank all those folks who've been willing to buy in and do the work.

**Sally Hammitt:** I told John I don't think I've ever worked so hard in my life. And from the second that I stepped through the door here at GLA, I've been saying the same thing:

We will end Veteran homelessness in LA. We're gonna do it. And I think we can do it anywhere.

Our team is so special here. And I know... Like I'd go up against anybody across the country with this team here in GLA. And not just our VA team, but our community partners because we're One Team.

**Douglas Tetrault:** Well on that hopeful yet competitive note there, Sally, I think we'll start to close out. Sally Hammitt and John Kuhn from GLA. Thank you for joining us today and bringing your insights. I know we only got through a part of everything that you do, so I'm sure there'll be some follow up. But again, thank you so much for taking the time. We do appreciate it. And on behalf of the Homeless Program Office and our team, really appreciate the work that's happening in LA and how it's informing other systems throughout the country.

So we hope you have a great day.

Thank you.

**Shawn Liu:** If you wanna know more about the services that VA [00:30:00] provides to Veterans experiencing homelessness and housing instability, visit us online [www.va.gov/Homeless](http://www.va.gov/Homeless). And you're Veteran who's Homeless or at risk of homelessness, reach out. Call National Call Center for Homeless Veterans at 877-424-3838. Trained counselors are standing by to help 24 hours a day, seven days week. That number again is 877-424-3838.

If you're enjoying this podcast, share it with friend may be interested too. We rely on your word of mouth and it would really help us out.

We hope that you found this time to be valuable and that feel empowered in our collective work to ensure that every Veteran has a safe and stable place to call home.

Take care.