

# EVH - Bonus - VA's Response Plan for Coordinating with Local Agencies During Homeless Encampment Closures

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So it's really unstable for folks to be living in encampments now, and we really want to try to get Veterans who are living in encampments into a safer shelter option.

**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.

[00:01:00] Trained counselors are standing by to help 24 hours a day, seven days a week. That number again is 877-424-3838.

Hey everyone, Shawn here. We've got another bonus episode for you today. We're going to be talking about unsheltered homelessness again.

Unsheltered homelessness is one of the most dangerous situations that a person can face. It severely and negatively impacts their whole health. Mind, body, and soul. So when a Veteran is unsheltered, there's really no time to delay in getting them into a safe place to stay, quickly, and on a path to permanent, stable housing.

When thinking about unsheltered homelessness, especially today here in 2024, homeless encampments come up a lot. They might be one of the most visible forms of unsheltered homelessness that we see in the current era.

At VA, we're going to be spending a lot of time over the next several months supporting Veterans living in encampments and getting them into safe, stable, [00:02:00] temporary housing, and again, on that path to permanent housing.

And since this is going to be a major focus for us, it's probably a good idea for us to do another episode on it.

But before we get on that, what precisely are encampments? Why are they so bad? Why are they going to be a focus for us? And most importantly, what exactly are we at VA doing about it?

Those are really great questions.

**Shawn Liu:** So, to help us learn more about VA's action plan to support Veterans during encampment closures, I can think of no one better to talk to, once again, than our very own Jill Albanese.

She is the Senior Advisor to the Executive Director and Director of Clinical Operations here in the Homeless Programs Office.

Let's dive on in. Jill, welcome back to the show.

**Jill Albanese:** Hey, Shawn, great to be here.

**Shawn Liu:** Great to have you back. This is essentially turning into the, Shawn and Jill show, periodically over time. We have you on so much, which is fantastic.

But the reason why we have you on so much is because we've been doing a lot of episodes about these more strategic components of the work.

So thinking really high level and broad. And [00:03:00] you're basically one of our strategic leads in our office. And this is a really important topic. We've been focusing a lot over this last year on unsheltered homelessness. So when Veterans live literally on the streets in the woods, in encampments, and under bridges. But encampments, that concept is really coming into focus and you've been leading the development and now implementation of an action plan for us at VA to support Veterans in encampments. Not so that they can live there indefinitely, but so that we can actually move them out of the encampments into safer locations, and on a path to permanent housing.

But I know I'm getting ahead of myself. It's probably important to level set a little bit, and I know, you've been asked this question a lot. Jill, to start us off, what exactly is an encampment? How are we defining it for the purposes of today's show, but also this action plan that we're implementing?

**Jill Albanese:** Yeah, so it's a great question, Shawn.

Our guidance is that an encampment is defined by three or more people living together unsheltered. However, [00:04:00] we also know that encampment is typically locally defined.

Some major cities, they may not consider a group of three folks living together unsheltered as an actual encampment.

They may define that as something much larger. So we're basically saying that, while the term encampment is locally defined, for our purposes, we're asking sites to define encampments as three or more folks living together unsheltered.

**Shawn Liu:** I want to kind of acknowledge from what I've been piecing together as we've been having a lot of these kind of planning sessions with communities and some of our national experts is that encampments are not necessarily folks just completely exposed to the elements. In many instances, the encampments are populated with temporary structures.

A lot of times, these could be tents, but in some instances, it could be shacks or other structures that are made with different scraps of pieces of cardboard or metal that become, de facto, makeshift structures. And then, as you mentioned, three or more folks.

What's really [00:05:00] important for us in terms of this definition, especially as communities all across the country start talking about, and I know we use a lot of different terms for this, things like encampment closures, encampment resolution, where they basically dissolve the camp and everybody living there has to move on, that ultimately the most important decider of what an encampment means are those city, those municipalities that are going to be doing the closures because they're the ones who are going in moving, relocating the folks, et cetera, et cetera.

I know for us at VA, a big focus for us is going to be any Veterans who are currently living in encampments.

Jill, before we talk about our action plan, can you give us a sense of why exactly are encampments bad? I know this is probably a kind of a complex topic because on one hand encampments can be where people experiencing homelessness find support and maybe even a little bit of community and safety. But there are potentially all of these other kind of risk factors to health, mental health, risks of assault, disease etc.

Just to tie all of this [00:06:00] in, why are encampments bad?

**Jill Albanese:** The reason why we really try to focus on getting Veterans who are living in encampments into a safer more sheltered option is that we do see that there are greater health risks, as you mentioned.

When we look at this statistically, folks just have higher risks for disease. They have more mental health issues. As you mentioned, we also see that folks have more involvement with law enforcement when they're living unsheltered, we see folks statistically have more exposure to violence. Generally, it's just not safe for Veterans or anyone for that matter to live in an encampment.

We also are seeing more and more unpredictability that comes with living in an encampment. We understand that sometimes these encampments are communities, and in some instances, these communities have been in place for a long time. But we're seeing more and more that [00:07:00] municipalities are clearing these encampments often without much notice.

So it's really unstable for folks to be living in encampments now, and we really want to try to get Veterans who are living in encampments into a safer shelter option.

**Shawn Liu:** Yeah, that's a really good point.

We're going to start shifting gears a little bit and talking about what we at VA are doing about it, and I know when you and I have had conversations about how to think about this action plan, how to message and socialize the action plan to others. Our mission remains, it is the same mission to support Veterans who are homeless and get them into permanent housing. But we might be met with a new sense of urgency now, especially as cities are really taking a closer look as well in encampments and are looking to resolve or close encampments.

And for us at VA, regardless of whatever the city does, our commitment to Veterans remains. Our job is to get them into safe living environments and on that path to permanent housing while reducing the risk of health impacts

[00:08:00] or further traumatization. We know that homelessness is a traumatizing experience by itself.

So with that frame in mind, Jill, our ongoing commitment that has essentially a new sense of urgency, what are we doing about it? What is the action plan that is starting to come into fruition and is now being implemented?

**Jill Albanese:** Our mission hasn't changed. We've always done outreach, we've always tried to move folks as quickly as possible from unsheltered situations into one of our interim housing programs, into safe shelter. But we are a little bit more focused right now for the reasons that I've mentioned, that we just feel that there is a bigger sense of urgency. We're seeing encampments closed quickly without much notice.

We've really come up with three core actions that we're asking all sites to do.

And the first thing we're doing is we are developing a nationwide inventory of encampments that we know about. And we're also identifying whether or not those encampments have already been scheduled for closures. We also are asking all of our sites, because we know that folks are doing outreach out there, asking [00:09:00] them to identify how many Veterans are living in those encampments, and just making sure that while folks are living in encampments, that the outreach is happening in all of those spaces.

One of the other things that we're doing is we're asking every medical center to activate what we're calling a local response team. So we, at the Homeless Program Office, we've put together a national response team to provide technical assistance and guidance to the field around managing and dealing with encampment closures. But we're asking each local site to also develop and activate a local response team to help when encampment closures are happening.

We feel that this is a crisis. We know that when an encampment is scheduled for closure, it is extremely traumatizing for the residents who are living there. And we want to make sure that if there are Veterans living in those encampments, that we're connecting with them, getting them connected to immediate shelter as soon as [00:10:00] possible, connecting those Veterans to health care, including emergency health care if they need it, and just making sure that our Veterans are not traumatized further when an encampment is closed.

The other thing that we're doing is we are developing and disseminating national guidance on strategies to make sure that folks are using promising practices wherever possible to manage encampments when they're being closed.

**Shawn Liu:** Yeah, that's a really sounds like a pretty solid, it's like comprehensive core actions and they make sense, right? Like number one, identify all the encampments and how many Veterans are there. Number two, get your response teams up and running. And number three, use the emerging practices, the promising practices that are out there that we've seen really effective communities when they humanely and safely move folks out of encampments and into temporary housing, into permanent housing, what they are.

Jill, can you give us, from a high level, what some of those strategies are?

**Jill Albanese:** Yeah, for sure.

There are five strategies that we're really focused on right now and really trying to help [00:11:00] our medical centers get up to speed on all of these just building on the existing strategies that we were already doing. We're really just trying to strengthen and refine those and focus them a bit more.

One of the things that we're doing is we're strengthening our outreach teams, providing them with as much support as they need to do really good comprehensive outreach.

We're also encouraging sites to treat this as an all hands on deck approach. So we need everyone involved, not just our outreach workers, but we need our medical providers to be out there doing outreach with us as well.

The other thing that we're doing is just ensuring that all of our interim housing is low barrier and that folks can access it the same day. We know that folks can't wait two days if an encampment is being closed or when they decide that they want safe shelter. We need to be able to get them in the same day, not two days later.

The third strategy is preventing folks from entering the criminal [00:12:00] justice system. We know that in some instances, and I've certainly seen it out here in California, that there are times when folks are ticketed or even arrested if they refuse shelter. So we want to make sure that this isn't happening to our Veterans.

First of all, we obviously don't want them to be in an encampment. We want to offer them shelter so that they're getting shelter instead of a ticket or arrested. But if Veterans do find themselves getting ticketed for being homeless, we want our Veteran Justice Outreach folks to be able to connect with them, provide legal services if possible.

We're also utilizing the relationships that our Veteran justice programs have already built with local law enforcement to make sure that if law enforcement are, connecting with Veterans while they're doing their outreach or if they are involved in encampment closures, we want those local law enforcement folks to refer Veterans to VA for VA care instead of ticketing them or getting them involved in the criminal [00:13:00] justice system.

The other strategy that we're working on is just integrating necessary health care. I mentioned that we want our health care providers out there doing outreach with us. We are ensuring that there is health care available to Veterans who are living in encampments. And when encampment closures happen, we want healthcare to be available to those Veterans who may have healthcare issues and need immediate care and services.

And then the fifth strategy is really making sure that we're coordinating and collaborating with our federal state and local partners. We know that there's a lot of great work already happening. There's a lot of guidance that's been provided. There are local outreach teams already doing some of this work.

We want to make sure that our efforts are coordinated with those of again, other agencies and local providers.

**Shawn Liu:** Excellent. That's really comprehensive.

So if I heard, just to summarize, we have enhancing outreach directly to folks in encampments, working on same day access to temporary settings like emergency shelter and transitional housing, avoiding and deflecting [00:14:00] involvement from the criminal legal system, getting Veterans connected to the full range of healthcare benefits that they need and are eligible for, and then making sure we're partnering with all of our different stakeholders at all the different levels.

Jill, this has been really helpful. Fantastic stuff. I know you've been working hard to get this going. I'll probably ask to have you on in the next several months for just like a progress update, because I know this is something that



folks are going to be very focused in and interested in hearing how things are developing.

Before we let you go if folks want to learn more, where can they go to find any additional information about the action plan?

**Jill Albanese:** Our action plan is posted on our website. And you can see it at... uh,

**Shawn Liu:** We'll put a link in the description. We'll put that link in the description. Yeah. Awesome.

Jill Albanese is the Senior Advisor to the Executive Director and the Director of Clinical Operations here in the Homeless Programs Office.

Jill, as always, thanks so much for the gift of your time.

**Jill Albanese:** Thank you, Shawn.

**Shawn Liu:** If you want to know more about the services that VA provides to Veterans experiencing homelessness and housing instability, visit us online at [00:15:00] [www.va.gov/Homeless](http://www.va.gov/Homeless).

And 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 number again is 877-424-3838.

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

Take care.

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