

# EVH - An Introduction to Veteran Homelessness, Part 1: What is Veteran Homelessness?

**Shawn Liu:** [00:00:00] Welcome to Ending Veteran Homelessness, your first hand 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 number again is 877-424-3838.

Hey everyone, Shawn here. We've got a special mini series for you today: an Introduction to Veteran Homelessness.

It's of no surprise to anybody that in 2024, homelessness in America is a hot button political issue.

For voters in many communities, it's one of their top concerns. And for good reason, [00:01:00] too. Everywhere you look, it seems like homelessness in America is worsening. We see it in the streets, and we also see it in our data, with overall homelessness in America increasing by 12. from 2022 to 2023, according to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development.

Among Veterans, their rate of homelessness has increased, too, from 2022 to 2023, but not as much. It increased only about 7.4%.

Still, no Veteran should be homeless in the country that they fought to defend. And here at VA, we're committed to ending homelessness among Veterans because it's our nation's duty to ensure that all Veterans have a safe and stable place to call home.

Here on this show, we strive to provide you, our listeners, with a demystified, accessible look into this work.

VA is the federal government's second largest department after the U. S. Department of Defense. It's a massive bureaucracy with hundreds of different programs, and services, and offices, and benefits, and... and you get the idea.

Homeless services for Veterans are often [00:02:00] just as complex and technical. So many acronyms, and initialisms, and jargon, and eligibility criteria... and you get the idea. In these moments, I find it really helpful to just pause and reorient ourselves to the mission. Especially when, as service providers, we take for granted and incorrectly assume that you, our listeners, you know that jargon, or acronyms, or our government gobbledygook.

So, let's pause a sec, and check in on some basics.

What does it mean for someone to be homeless? Why do Veterans become homeless? What are we doing about it? And, most importantly, is it working?

Those are really great questions. So, to help us answer those questions, we developed this three-part mini series providing you with an introduction to Veteran homelessness.

In Part 1, we're going to provide you with a super high-level overview on Veteran homelessness: what the definition of homelessness is, what the factors are that increase a Veteran's risk of becoming homeless, and the progress to date.

In [00:03:00] Part 2, we're going to learn more about the Veterans we serve: what their demographic trends are, which subpopulations may need particular attention.

And lastly, in Part 3, we'll close out this mini series talking about the tools in our toolkit: the different interventions that we at VA provide, and the programs and services that deliver them.

Our hope is that at the end of this mini series, you'll leave feeling better informed and better able to join us on this work.

To help you follow along, we provided a PDF in the description of your podcast. It's going to contain a lot of visuals, references, etc. Because I'm going to be referring to a lot of different graphics, and it'll just be easy for if you have a visual to check it out.

Okay, let's start with some definitions. What do we mean when we say homeless Veteran?

So if you go to slide two in your handout, when we think about eligibility criteria for VA homeless programs and services, you're going to see a list of different categories. This is actually the federal definition of [00:04:00] homeless for our purposes. It was originally codified into law by the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act of 1987. I think I was six at the time when this law was passed. And it provided the first federal dollars for homeless shelter Programs. It was later amended and reauthorized by the Homeless Emergency Assistance and Rapid Transition to Housing or HEARTH Act of 2009.

And the HEARTH Act also provided us some additional clarification on four different categories.

Category 1, a Veteran is considered homeless if they lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence, such as those living in emergency shelters, transitional housing, or places not meant for human habitation. In many ways, this is the standard conceptualization of homeless, somebody living literally on the streets, in the woods, in encampments, under bridges. That's what we think of as unsheltered homelessness.

But then also sheltered homelessness. So again, as the definition goes, emergency [00:05:00] shelters and transitional housing programs. During the COVID-19 pandemic, we made fantastic uses of hotels and motels as shelters. All of that we consider Category 1 homeless. And again, as I mentioned, this is the most common, intuitive form of homeless that regular folks, when they think about homelessness, they think about.

Category 2 homelessness has to do with imminent risk. An individual or family who will imminently lose their primary nighttime residence, usually considered within 14 days, and that, but for some other type of assistance, they will end up in that Category 1.

This is often evidenced by evictions, eviction paperwork, and other circumstances where, as you look at the family, you can identify that they don't have any other place to go. They're gonna meet that Category 1 definition in the next two weeks. And so in Category 2, if this is you, you are considered homeless for the purposes of different program eligibility.

Category 3 is a really, really important one. It captures [00:06:00] unaccompanied youth under the age of 25. or families with minor children and

youth who may qualify under other federal statutes. Now, that's really, really complicated. So to simplify this a little bit, what we're largely talking about is essentially couch surfing or being doubled up if you are a family with minor children or youth, or youth under the age of 25.

In our world, in homeless services, anybody's considered youth if they're under 25 years of age, which I know is several more years. Older than being a technical adult. We find that folks under 25 years of age, they lack a lot of resources, they are way more vulnerable, so we can still consider them youth.

And what we're talking about is essentially a really disruptive, unstable type of couch surfing. So what we're not talking about is somebody who's living with a family or friend for six months, a year, two years, et cetera, et cetera. We're actually talking about somebody who's couch surfing and bouncing from place to place multiple times.

So maybe they're with their [00:07:00] mom for five days, but then with a friend for another four days, but then with a different classmate for maybe a week, but then with their aunties and uncles for three more days. That bouncing around is really, really disruptive. It's chaotic. It's detrimental, especially for minor children and youth.

So in the actual category language, what we're largely talking about are two or more moves in the most recent 60 days or two months, right? So that pattern of instability. If you're couchsurfing with that level of instability, you meet the Category 3 definition of homeless and you're eligible for programs.

The last one is also a really important one. Category 4 is an individual or family who is fleeing domestic violence or some other life threatening circumstance. This really, really impacts women, in particular women Veterans, who may not feel safe going into shelters, who, there may not actually be shelter beds that are specific for women. Their shelter beds may be male only. And so they may find themselves either unsheltered or couch surfing as [00:08:00] well. And again, so if they're fleeing domestic violence or some other life threatening circumstance, such as a natural disaster, you'd be qualified under Category 4 for the purposes of program eligibility.

So this is what we mean when we say homeless.

If you go on to Slide 3, we're gonna shift a little bit and talk about what we mean when we say Veteran. Now, I want to acknowledge the definition of Veteran almost always is tied into some type of eligibility criteria. Now, what

we're looking at here in terms of the definition for Veteran, it is broader than VA healthcare eligibility and oftentimes eligibility for VA homeless programs.

For the purposes of achieving effective ends to Veteran homelessness all across the country, a person is considered a Veteran if they are an adult who served in the active duty in the United States Armed Forces, and this includes people who have served in active duty from the Reserves or the National Guard, regardless of how long they served or what discharge type they received.

Now, this is really important, especially when we start thinking about the counts of the [00:09:00] number of Veterans experiencing homelessness across the country, A lot of times, program eligibility is contingent upon their discharge status.

But for the purposes of our work to end Veteran homelessness, we actually care about all Veterans, including those with dishonorable discharge status.

What that may mean for communities all across the country, especially for Veterans with dishonorable discharges, is that we may need to partner together to find community resources, additional services to help those Veterans move out of homelessness and into housing. This is admittedly a very broad definition, but it speaks to the scope and scale of what we're trying to accomplish all across the country.

This is all well and good, but if we move on, you probably are asking, "Well, Shawn, Team VA, why on earth do Veterans become homeless? What is the deal? Why are they falling into homelessness?"

That's a really great question.

So, if we move on to slide four, you're actually going to see a breakdown.

When we think about the risk factors for Veterans becoming homeless, we largely think of them in two different categories: individual risk factors and [00:10:00] system level factors.

Individual risk factors have to do with the person themselves. So the individual Veteran, why this Veteran as opposed to that Veteran may have a greater risk of becoming homeless.

And the risk factors are things that you probably can intuitively guess at, right? Mental illness, substance use disorders, those are things that we hear a lot about

in the news, so you're probably well aware of them. Other risk factors, such as lack of stable income or employment, a history of incarceration for male Veterans, a history of incarceration is a huge risk factor, lack of social support, and maybe somewhat counterintuitively, adverse childhood events, so circumstances that happened even before the Veteran entered into military service.

All of these risk factors were from a 2015 study that our National Center on Homelessness among Veterans did. We have the actual citation here on slide four that you can check out as well.

As an aside, it's pretty easy for us to identify individual risk factors for homelessness, because we have such a robust [00:11:00] data set in patient care information and service information from VA's massive healthcare database. So we have a lot of information that we can identify risk factors on the individual level.

System-level factors are a little bit harder to tease out, because they have to do with the communities that the Veterans live in. Things that are beyond they're actual health care activity, and these are things that you may not think about immediately as risk factors, but the more I talk about them, I bet you they start making sense, because they're about the environment that individual Veterans may live in. And this has to do with things like lack of affordable housing, so whether or not there are apartments or homes that Veterans can rent or buy that are affordable at their income. Lack of economic opportunities. So whether or not a Veteran has job skills or can actually get a good job, are there good jobs in their community that pay good, decent living wages? Other things like high crime neighborhoods and cultural factors may influence a Veteran's risk of becoming homeless that [00:12:00] often don't have much to do with the Veteran, but more to do with the environment that they live.

So when you think about Veteran homelessness, why do Veterans become homeless? Why does this Veteran, as opposed to that Veteran, or why does a Veteran living in this city, as opposed to that city? It's not just the one thing. It's not just the drugs. It's not just the alcohol or the mental health. It's the mix, it's the confluence, it's the interplay between these individual factors. and system-level factors.

If you go over to slide 5 real quick, I just want to acknowledge that some of these risk factors shift a little bit when we're talking about women Veterans. Slide 4 was Veterans overall, but a lot of times when we say Veteran overall, in most instances, we're talking about male Veterans. With women Veterans,

there's some subtle shifts. So we've included the research citation as well, so you can go read the actual study if you'd like as well. System level factors are largely the same, because women still live in the same environments that men do. But their individual risk factors shift a little bit, so things such as military sexual trauma start coming into [00:13:00] focus. Physical disabilities or chronic health conditions, anxiety or post traumatic stress disorders, specific conditions start moving up to the forefront with subtle differences.

At VA, a big part of making sure that as we move Veterans from homelessness to housing and help them stay housed, a big part of our focus is not just getting them to housing, but starting to address these risk factors so that we reduce their risk of becoming homeless again in the future.

Let's shift gears a little bit and talk about how the work is going so far.

On slide 6, you'll see a chart that shows our progress. I'm going to orient you to what's going on here real quick.

Each year, our partners at the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development Conduct what they call the annual Point-in-Time Count. It is basically a homeless person census where on a single night in the year, usually the coldest night of the year, mid to late January we and a bunch of volunteers all across the country go out and we physically count all of the people experiencing homelessness, including Veterans. So what [00:14:00] this chart represents is basically the year-over-year change of Veterans counted in that annual Point-in-Time Count survey.

By and large, we've had some really, really great progress in Veteran homelessness. Since 2010, we've seen a 52% reduction in Veteran homelessness.

This is both unprecedented in the history of our country, and when other subpopulations are actually seeing stagnation or increases in their homelessness. Veteran homelessness has gone down quite a bit. I'm gonna unpack what you're seeing here a little bit as well. You have three lines. The top bright red line is overall homelessness among Veterans.

And again, that decreased by 52%. The middle maroon line represents sheltered homelessness. So again, if you think back to Category 1, sheltered homelessness are Veterans living in emergency shelters, transitional housing programs, maybe it's hotels and motels. That has actually decreased by 53.8% since 2010.

And then lastly, the bottom dark blue line represents unsheltered [00:15:00] homelessness. So again, think literally on the streets. Literally in the woods, in encampments, under bridges. Just as an aside, unsheltered homelessness is one of the most dangerous experiences a person can face, and so it's a big priority for us.

And what you can also see is that it's decreased as well, but not as much. Unsheltered homelessness has only decreased about 49.4% since 2010. So we still have much more work to do, especially since this is such a high priority, very, very vulnerable subpopulation. Unsheltered homelessness is very, very bad.

Now, one of the things that we talk about in VA and homeless services is this concept of disaggregating your data. Taking a look at different sub populations of a community to see how they're doing as well. And so we've done this with women Veterans because the information is nice and publicly available. You can check this out as well.

So if you go over to slide 7 you're going to see this similar information, the Point-in-Time Count year-over-year change, but specifically homing in on women Veterans.

Now, a [00:16:00] couple different things. First and foremost, we actually don't have data on, gendered data, going back to 2010.

So the furthest we have to go back with our partners at the Department of Housing and Urban Development is 2014. So we're going to do an apples-to-apples comparison in a little bit. But for right now, we're looking at 2014 to 2023, and we see that homelessness among women Veterans has decreased by about 14.4%.

Let me unpack this a little bit more for you. The dark purple line at the top represents overall homelessness among women Veterans. The bright red or bright pink line in the middle represents sheltered homelessness among women Veterans.

That has pretty much decreased pretty good from around 13.9%. But something that's quite alarming for us, the light blue line at the bottom, this is unsheltered homelessness among women. That actually saw an increase of 24% since 2014. So, we saw a pretty steady decrease in sheltered homelessness, but it was kind of offset [00:17:00] a bit by an increase in unsheltered homelessness.



Remember, unsheltered homelessness is one of the most dangerous experiences a person can face.

So this is pretty alarming. Now, I know you're probably thinking, "Shawn, I'm following along with your little charts. One chart was 2010 to 2023. Another chart was 2014 to 2023. Those don't add up, Shawn. What are you comparing to?"

And I hear you. So let's go on to slide 8.

At slide 8, you'll actually see them compared overall homelessness among Veterans, which is that bright red line that we saw a couple of slides ago versus overall homelessness among women Veterans, which is that dark purple line that we saw a moment ago.

And you can see a really important bit and making a strong case of why things like disaggregating your data to take a look how different sub populations are doing, this puts it into focus. From 14 we saw overall Veteran homelessness decreased by around 26%.

Basically, 27 percent, 26. But during that same time period, Veteran homelessness among women only decreased by around [00:18:00] 14.4%. The increases, when you see them kicking up in the later years, are more stark, and we already know that a lot of that increase is driven by unsheltered homelessness.

So this is a really, really important topic.

Let's go on to slide 9. If you check out slide 9, we're doing the similar comparison. We're looking at overall homelessness. Again, we're back 2010 to 2023, but instead of comparing all Veterans to women Veterans, we're comparing all Veterans to all homeless people.

So we're talking about civilians as well. And what you could see here is that although Veteran homelessness has decreased by 52%, homelessness among everybody, the general population, actually increased by 2.5%. This is also pretty alarming because homeless Veterans still live in the same communities that all homeless people live in. And, if you have that impression that homelessness is getting worse, we are indeed seeing it in our data.

The last chart that I want to show for you that provides a final story beat to what we're seeing in our data. On slide 10, [00:19:00] what we're now looking at is

the reduction in Veteran homelessness, but in comparison to the average fair market rent rate, as determined by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, for one bedroom units from 2010 to 2023. And what you see is these two lines separating and diverging over time. That the cost of a one bedroom unit has been steadily increasing over time and kind of keeping in lock step with how our progress has actually slowed down since 2016. And that the uptick in Veteran homelessness from 2022 to 2023 mirrors a massive uptick in the FMR rate, which, again, is very correlative to housing rates all across the country.

So what you can see here is evidence to suggest that a big driver in the uptick of homelessness, both among Veterans and the general population, is increased housing costs, is a lack of affordable housing.

Okay, let's shift gears and go to slide 11. Now, we're going to spend a little bit more time on this in part 3, but just from a high level, and I guess [00:20:00] to whet your palate for part 3, at VA, we offer a wide array of services to address the full range of housing needs that a Veteran may have. And we've linked them to the different intervention points along the homelessness to housing journey that a Veteran may have to go through.

We have prevention services that keep Veterans from becoming homeless in the first place so that they can stay in their own homes.

If a Veteran does become homeless, we have outreach, engagement, assessment, and referral services that serve as the front door to both VA homeless programs and the broader array of VA programs and services. Not just homeless programs, but the health care and the benefits as well.

Just as an aside, we also not only have outreach that works with Veterans who are homeless, but if you remember, history of incarceration is a big driver too, so we have outreach that actually goes into jails and prisons to make sure that as Veterans are exiting those criminal legal settings, that they're getting connected to us at VA and on that road to recovery.

For Veterans who [00:21:00] unfortunately do become homeless, we also have temporary housing, we call them residential services, that provide them with safe places to stay right now as they work on their journey to permanent housing.

And then finally, permanent housing services that provide Veterans with short or long term rental assistance that makes rent affordable for them and short or

long term case management that helps them get all of the benefits and assistance that they need so that when they get housed, they stay housed.

Also, just really quickly, if you go to slide 12, you're going to see the list, this is our alphabet soup slide, all of the different programs and services. These are also hyperlinks, so if you want to learn more about them, you can click on the hyperlink and go check them out.

As we wind down this episode, I want to just give you a couple different things to think about, especially if you feel compelled to be part of this journey with us. Depending on what resources you have, how you're situated in society, you may encounter, I guarantee you're going to encounter a Veteran experiencing homelessness, and there are many opportunities.

If you go to slide 13, if you find [00:22:00] yourself face to face with a homeless Veteran, first and foremost, be patient. They may not have had their basic needs met. When you think about basic needs we're talking about sleep, water, food, shelter.

They may not have those, especially if they're unsheltered homeless. When I don't eat at my normal scheduled times, I turn into a giant baby. I get hangry really, really bad.

Now, if you're homeless, exposed to the elements, it's getting hotter outside, they might be dehydrated. That might be turned up to 11. So, remember, they may not have had their basic needs met. Patience and grace is really important.

If you're trying to connect them to program services, keep in mind that they may not have a reliable means of communication, or a physical address to provide, they may need some help in order to get connected to us.

Lastly, you want to instill hope, but never over promise. Folks who have experienced homelessness have experienced a lot of trauma, they've been failed by the system, and so their trust in us is in many ways broken, and the work that we all do to help get them connected to programs and services that will get them out of homelessness, [00:23:00] often starts with building trust, building rapport, and really repairing a lot of those broken promises. And so in the process, we need to make sure that we don't exacerbate that by over promising and failing to deliver for them.

At slide 14, if you're in a position, maybe you're part of an organization, maybe you want to volunteer, you want to get involved, but you don't know where to

start, and to be honest, VA's phone tree is a little bit intimidating, send us an email at [homelessvets@va.gov](mailto:homelessvets@va.gov). We'll get connected to your local VA so that you can figure out what opportunities there are to help.

Slide 15 provides one of the most frequent calls to action. You hear it on every episode of Ending Veteran Homelessness. It's our National Call Center for homeless Veterans, 877-424-3838. It's a really great number just to keep in your phone. If you encounter a homeless Veteran, keep it handy, help them find an opportunity to call. That'll get them connected to us so we can get them connected to our programs and services.

If you go to slide 16, we're going to start talking about other ways to make an impact, [00:24:00] especially if you're able to scale some of the support that you have.

When it comes to volunteer opportunities, there are a lot of things that VA provides and there are a lot of things that we can't provide. Maybe we can't provide it because we're an Executive branch department, and we can only do what Congress gives us the authority to do. And if Congress didn't give us the authority to do it, we can't, regardless of how good of an idea it is.

That's where you come in. There are opportunities for you to help us by providing things like training, or furniture, or move in essentials, food for Veterans, transportation, increased access, stable income, etc., etc. There are a lot of opportunities to make an impact. And our VA Center for Development and Civic Engagement is the office in which all of the different volunteers come and actually help us, whether it's with homeless Veterans or housed Veterans. We have a link here on slide 16, so you can check out your local Center for Development and Civic Engagement office and connect to see how you can make a difference.

At slide 17, maybe you want to consider volunteering for a stand down. Stand downs are these fantastic one to [00:25:00] three day events where we provide Veterans with food, clothing, health screenings and a ton of resources as well. Stand Downs are community organized events. These resource fairs are fantastic. They're kind of like job fairs, but with resources for homeless Veterans. There might be a stand down happening in your community in the coming months. If you want to check out to see our upcoming stand on events, visit this link on slide 17. It'll take you to our upcoming stand on events. We're adding new events every week. And new events happen all throughout the course of the year. So there may be an event near you.

As we start winding down, I just want to provide a couple more quick calls to action depending on if you have these type of resources.

Here on slide 18, if you happen to be listening to this and you're a landlord, we encourage you to rent to our Veterans. You, as a landlord, have an amazing opportunity to give back to those who served. In addition, there are actually a lot of really great benefits to renting to Veterans who are being served in our program. It's pretty reliable income. You have support from VA case managers [00:26:00] and our grantees to provide ongoing support to your Veteran tenant. And again, it's a great opportunity to serve those who've served.

You can click on this link to our landlords page so you can find more information, and send us your housing unit information so that we can actually get it to our homeless program leads locally and get some Veterans into some housing.

If we go on to slide 19, I want to acknowledge that there are folks out there who may not be landlords but still want to help house homeless Veterans. There are a lot of other different opportunities in which we at VA partner with organizations to provide different housing options, not just permanent housing, but some of those temporary housing options that we touched on a little bit earlier, and that we'll touch on more in Part 3.

If you want to learn more about how we do that, check out our article. It's called "So, You Want to House Homeless Veterans." It goes through all of our different major programs and the opening steps, the first steps in order to get involved with that. Check it out on slide 19.

Lastly, as we come to a close, on slide 20, if you're an employer and you have jobs, hire our Veterans who are participating in our programs.

Yes, it is true that many of the [00:27:00] Veterans that we work with have chronic disabilities, but many of the Veterans that we work with are ready, willing, and able to go to work, and that employment is going to be their ticket to financial stability, which is why we need you.

If you have jobs, especially good paying jobs, and you want to give back to our country's Veterans, hire the Veterans participating in our programs. We have what we call Community Employment Coordinators all throughout the country who help build these job opportunities for the Veterans that we work with.

If you want to find your local Community Employment Coordinator, check out the link here on slide 20. We can get you connected and we can get some Veterans some jobs.

Okay, that is all for Part 1.

As a reminder, Part 2, we're going to talk about the demographics of the Veterans that we serve, who we're serving, what those trends are, who's vulnerable that needs very specific attention.

And then we hope you'll join us for Part 3 as we close out this series, which is all about the different interventions that we offer and the programs and services that provide them.

If you want to know more about the services that VA provides to Veterans [00:28:00] experiencing homelessness and housing instability, visit us online at [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.

If you're enjoying the show, leave us a review on Apple Podcasts. It would really help us out.

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. [00:29:00] [00:30:00]