

EVH S1EP13 - How VA Helps Unsheltered Veterans Come Inside

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We can assume that every single person that is experiencing homelessness has had some type of traumatic experience. I think that's very important to remember - that they are citizens, they are humans, and that they've experienced the loss.

Shawn Liu: 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 [00:01:00] 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.

You see them on the news, you see them when you drive around town, and these days, it feels like you see them way more frequently - people experiencing unsheltered homelessness. Indeed, according to the U. S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, since 2015, unsheltered homelessness has been on the rise, increasing by more than 33% from 2015 to 2022.

For Veterans, the situation is a bit better, with unsheltered homelessness among Veterans having decreased by 16% from the same time period, 2015 to 2022.

Now, many communities have demonstrated successes in implementing the systemic changes needed to accomplish reductions in unsheltered [00:02:00] homelessness. However, other regions, particularly on the West Coast, still report large numbers of unsheltered Veterans.

Now, you're probably saying, "Whoa, Shawn, wait a minute. All of this sounds like a bunch of government gobbledygook. You gotta back up. What exactly is

unsheltered homelessness? Why is this such a big deal? And most importantly, what are y'all doing to help these folks?"

Those are really great questions. So, to help us learn more about unsheltered homelessness among Veterans and what VA and the federal government are doing about it, I can think of no one better to talk to than our next two guests.

First, we have Allison Bond, the Deputy Director for the Healthcare for Homeless Veterans Program here in the VHA Homeless Programs Office, where she oversees the Community Resource and Referral Centers and our outreach services.

Today, she's joined by Anthony Love, the Principal Advisor to the Executive Director for Inter and Intra Agency Collaboration and Director of Community Engagement here at the Homeless Programs Office, where he provides strategic advice and counsel [00:03:00] to the Executive Director on intra and inter agency initiatives, as well as build community relationships to help Veterans exit homelessness.

Allison, Anthony, welcome to the show.

Allison Bond: Thanks, Shawn so happy to be here with you today.

Anthony Love: Thank you so much.

Shawn Liu: Yeah, great. Great to have you both here. This is a really important topic. And Anthony, a couple of things, just want to acknowledge you're in Los Angeles today. So you're recording live from your hotel room. And you probably have the largest title that I've seen to date out of any of our colleagues here in the Homeless Programs Office. That is a mighty large title, my friend.

Anthony Love: Ah yes, it is. it's a large title, but it's a large mission.

Shawn Liu: It is a large mission.

Anthony Love: So I'm just honored to be able to serve our Veterans.

Shawn Liu: Before we dive on into it, you both are new to our podcast, so I want to help our viewers get to know you a little bit better.

Allison, let's start with you. Tell us a little bit about yourself. I just want to acknowledge, on our very second episode of this podcast, we had your boss, Eileen Divine. She's our National Director [00:04:00] for the Healthcare for Homeless Veterans Program. You're the Deputy Director. Tell us a little bit about your role.

Allison Bond: Eileen is a superstar. So those are big, big shoes to follow behind. I'll go ahead and admit. Our primary focus in HCHV is really outreach. In addition to outreach, I also get to focus on our Community Resource and Referral Centers, and we have 33 of these amazing one stop shops across the country - a great place for Veterans to stop in and receive all kinds of resources. Wish we had more of them. Those are my two primary focuses.

Shawn Liu: When we brought Eileen on the podcast for our very second episode. It was actually just about outreach, right? And it really answered the question, well, if we have all these veterans experiencing homelessness, how exactly do they get connected to VA? And your program, that outreach component, really is the way to do it.

And I love CRRCs as well. There's one here in my hometown of Jacksonville, Florida, where Veterans can just walk in and get all of the services: healthcare, assessments, [00:05:00] referrals, even some other tangible goods, like in some instances, like showers, am I right? And other donations.

Allison Bond: Right, that's exactly right. A lot of our CRRCs have what we call concrete services. So that includes being able to walk in and do their laundry if they need to, or store some belongings. Just those really concrete things that make one's life a lot easier.

Shawn Liu: Anthony, how about you?

Most epic title in the agency. A lot of inter and intra agency collaboration. I know for many people, we're gonna have to unpack the difference between inter and intra. And then community engagement, developing partnerships. Tell us about your role here in the Homeless Programs Office.

Anthony Love: My role is to be that glue to bring in particular agencies or connect the aligned VA Homeless program Offices with agencies that are also doing the work to end homelessness. And although they're doing to work in homelessness broadly, what we have to remember, our Veterans are citizens first and foremost. So they also can tap into those [00:06:00] resources to help them along their journey to exit homelessness.

Some of those federal partners are like the Department of Housing and Urban Development, Health and Human Services, the U. S. Interagency Council on Homelessness. That's what I would call the inter agency part of it. And when you talk about intra, VA is such a large federal agency. And so there are partners within VA, outside of the Homeless Program Office, where I build relationships, whether it be with, our Faith Based and Neighborhood Partnership Office, along with the Women's Veterans Office. Also working with our Veterans Benefits Administration to help those veterans who are exiting homelessness better understand and get connected with the benefits.

And then on the community engagement side, that's going out to build partnerships with community organizations to fill those gaps that VA cannot legislatively fill or are in areas where VA doesn't have as much of a presence in order to fill.

My whole role is connectivity and partnerships.

Shawn Liu: Yeah, that's a really, really big task, a really tall order. And you're bringing up a [00:07:00] lot of really important points, both in your role. And I think just to give people that inside look about how these systems, like there's so many resources and they're scattered all throughout not only the federal government, different levels of government: states, local, and federal. Even within VA. And we need those connectors. You described it as glue. I think another really great example is almost like matchmaker or broker, where you're just like bringing in all these resources.

And I've always appreciated this point that you make every time that I hang out with you, like you, you make it to our public, which is: Veterans are citizens. I think people forget that. We get so focused on creating Veteran-tailored, Veteran-specific services, and a lot of really important cultural, honor, even just effectiveness and service delivery reasons to create tailored services for Veterans.

And those same Veterans are still eligible for the very same resources that you, I, and Allison as non-Veterans are also eligible for. So, being able to connect Veterans to the Veteran-specific resources [00:08:00] and everything else is super, super critical.

Anthony Love: No, absolutely. Absolutely. It just isn't reasonable to think that one agency can fill all of their needs. We often say that this is an all hands on deck effort to end homelessness among veterans. And again, It is, it's imperative that we bring others on board to work with VA to help those Veterans.

Shawn Liu: All right. Let's go ahead and dive on in. Allison, I want to come back over to you.

Let's start unpacking this really important topic: unsheltered homelessness. What on earth do we mean, because we're going to say this a lot, not only on this episode, but throughout the rest of this calendar year of 2023. It's a big focus for VA and our homelessness goals where we actually set a goal to engage with 28,000 unsheltered homeless veterans.

So what do we mean, Alison, when we say unsheltered homelessness, what does that look like in the real world?

Allison Bond: You know, we tend to think about housing status in two ways, and it might be helpful to look at it this way. So, sheltered and unsheltered. [00:09:00] And sheltered homeless people spend the night in emergency shelters, like your local Salvation Army, your rescue missions. And transitional housing, any kind of temporary housing.

Versus unsheltered homeless people that are sleeping on the street, in their cars, abandoned buildings, any place that is not meant for human habitation. That's kind of how it breaks down.

Shawn Liu: You can hear, there's a lot of different terms that folks use. It's like the difference between cola, coke, and pop. Some people will call it like sleeping rough. I sometimes say literally on the streets, literally in tents. But that's what we're talking about. You're not in a building or a program. You don't have a roof over your head that is specifically for temporary shelter or transitional housing for people experiencing homelessness. You're just out there.

And it's a really, really important distinction. And I just want to kind of acknowledge Allison, something that you mentioned about the temporary settings. Because a lot of times in our services, we hyper fixate on [00:10:00] eligibility, the things about your experience, your challenges, your struggles that will make you eligible or unfortunately sometimes not eligible for other types of services.

And you described a lot of different temporary living spaces like emergency shelters, transitional housings. I know there's a term called low demand safe havens that are out there. And what's interesting about these settings is that when you are there, for the purposes of program eligibility to get some other services, you're still considered homeless.

You're sheltered homeless. But you're still considered homeless and that kind of keeps you available and open to get access to other types of resources, benefits, and assistance to ultimately end the homelessness and get you into what we call like permanent housing.

Allison Bond: Yeah, that's exactly right. Yeah, we have a lot of definitions and it's, it's, it's hard not to get caught up in all that, um...

Shawn Liu: so much jargon, right? So much

Allison Bond: ... jargon. Right, exactly.

Shawn Liu: It makes your head spin.

Allison Bond: I think the.... It makes your head spin, but I think the bottom line is unsheltered is [00:11:00] what our focus is right now. We want to make sure that people are moving from outdoors, in an abandoned building, in a tent, in their car, into a home.

Shawn Liu: Allison, I want to stay on this topic a little bit and I want to get your take.

Why is unsheltered homelessness bad? But I don't necessarily want to take it from the view of why it's bad for communities or downtowns. I think there's enough folks out there in the media space that can write massive amounts of books or do hours and hours and hours of podcast or video media on why it's bad for communities or urban blight. I want to home in on the impact on people. I'd like to home in on the impact on our Veterans. Can you share with us a little bit about why the experience of unsheltered homelessness, being out exposed to the elements, why that's bad for our Veterans?

Allison Bond: It's important to recognize that people become homeless for so many different reasons. And whether we are supporting them as a member of the community, as a neighbor, as a social [00:12:00] worker providing them support in the VA, those reasons might not be clear, might not be immediately apparent.

We can assume that every single person that is experiencing homelessness has had some type of traumatic experience. That might have looked like some kind of a crisis, or it might have looked like some kind of a loss. And that could include like a financial hardship, loss of a job, a death of a loved one, eviction, substance use, loss of their community, a divorce, intimate partner violence, a

mental health crisis. I mean, it could be so many different things. I think that's very important to remember when you are thinking of people that are experiencing homelessness or unsheltered - that they are citizens, they are humans, and that they've experienced the loss.

Shawn Liu: When we had Eileen on last year, she mentioned exactly that. That the experience of homelessness is in itself traumatic, and a lot of times it can be traumas that will increase a Veteran's [00:13:00] risk of becoming homeless. So we always want to remember that the folks that we see, they have histories, they have lives, they have struggles, there's a really, really important story there.

We're also going to put into the description a link to an article that we developed about the health impacts of unsheltered homelessness. What we say a lot is that the experience of unsheltered homelessness affects a Veteran's health, not just their health, their whole health, mind, body, and soul. It's like really, really bad stuff.

And we're going to put a link to that article in the description as well, so you can check it out.

Allison, I want to stay with you a little bit before we broaden out and get Anthony's take. What are we doing about this? This is a really bad situation. And it's not just bad for our Veterans. It's bad for our communities.

What are we doing about it? What are we doing to help?

Allison Bond: A couple things.

One, we require all medical centers across the country to be doing outreach.

We know the importance of it and value outreach. And we know that it looks different across the country, whether that is a very urban area, rural area. But we [00:14:00] ask that every hospital medical center across the country is doing outreach. And so whether that is in collaboration with community partners who are already out there doing the work or VA is doing it solo.

One of the best practices that we're hearing right now is that outreach is happening in collaboration with a social worker and a peer support specialist.

Shawn Liu: Just really quickly, Alison. When we say peer support specialists, we're actually talking about actual Veterans, oftentimes who are formerly homeless, who are now on staff specifically to help engender trust, build

relationships with veterans who are currently homeless and to bring them into the system.

Did I get that right?

Allison Bond: That's exactly right. Yes, we're hearing that that is one of the most powerful forms, effective forms of outreach that is happening right now across the country. And so we want to spread that word.

In addition, the HCHV program has just funded 160 new positions. And we're really excited. This is the first time that we've been able to do this in a really long time. And so [00:15:00] these positions are going to be dedicated to outreach and coordinated entry.

Shawn Liu: We're gonna put a pin in the coordinated entry bit for now because we're actually gonna have Eileen back on later this year to talk about coordinated entry because that's a really important component, but also very, very technical as well.

Probably a little bit more technical for today.

Anthony, I want to come over to you next. I know that in the last several months, we at VA have been participating in a lot of interagency work with various partners throughout the federal government to develop a national strategy to respond to what we're experiencing as a current crisis of unsheltered homelessness.

I know things are still in the works. And so there might be limits to what you can share, but can you tell us a little bit about what the general direction is? What are we as feds doing about unsheltered homelessness, not only among Veterans, but among all Americans?

Anthony Love: That's a good question. And you're right, some of the stuff is yet to be made for public viewing. I'll start with one of the things that we're doing.

This administration has [00:16:00] just released, a federal strategic plan called *All In*. And within that plan, there are six pillars, and one of those pillars, is a strategy to shore up our homeless response system.

And by shoring up that homeless response system, it is really an effort, an all out coordinated effort, to end unsheltered homelessness in our country. This

plan is being led by the U. S. Interagency Council on Homelessness, which coordinates the federal government's response to homelessness.

In partnership with the Domestic Policy Council, which is a White House agency that deals with domestic policy, they will issue a pilot program called an unsheltered sprint. And the sprint itself is called All Inside. And this is an effort for the feds to embed themselves with local communities to look at best practices and to work with those communities to ensure that the feds are doing everything that they can to make sure that these local communities can help those individuals who are in shelter to get back inside.

They will select, as a pilot, six communities [00:17:00] that they will work with to help those communities and learn from those communities and then spread that out.

Another thing that the feds are doing, and I'll just throw a plug in for one of our federal partners, the Department of Housing and Urban Development just put out a boatload of money, close to \$500 million in grants to address unsheltered homelessness as well as rural homelessness, which will impact over 60 communities.

So we're taking this very seriously.

Shawn Liu: I want to unpack things there. First and foremost, both of you knows my weird hangups or soapbox about cutesy names. However, All Inside is actually pretty clever. I like that.

We're going to put a link to *All In*, the new federal strategic plan, so that you can review. The last thing I want to unpack is the concept of a sprint. Just did a quick Google search for those who aren't familiar. The concept of a sprint is a project management term. It's like a short, focused amount of time. A couple of weeks where you're just doing a lot of intensive work. Just focus on a project, try to get as much done, see how you do, and then you do what's called iterate off of it, you like, you tweak and [00:18:00] adjust and you try it again, you tweak and adjust and you try it again.

So it sounds like you're doing that with a set of communities to see what kind of strong practices can emerge that we can spread out to the rest of the country. Did I hear that correctly?

Anthony Love: That you did, you, you heard that correctly. We'll have Memorandums of Agreement with those communities so the roles are clear. And it will be intense.

Shawn Liu: We have a lot of veterans who listen to this podcast, but we also have a lot of folks in the industry, a lot of community partners, providers, et cetera, et cetera. I can already hear them saying, "How do I become a pilot site?" And I can already kind of anticipate there's a good chance you've already selected the sites. Correct me if I'm wrong. There's really not a process by which you could like email Anthony and say that you want to be a pilot site. Right? I'm sure that's, you're well on your way to like launch it.

Anthony Love: No, that's a good point. No, the sites have already been selected. They're working on the Memorandum of Agreement. That's why it's not made public yet. But it is soon to be announced. And of course, "soon" as in government speak.

Shawn Liu: Yeah, no, totally. Like, as my dad would say, "Check's in the mail. Soon come, soon come."

Anthony, would it be okay if we brought you [00:19:00] back on as time went on with the sprint just to get like a status update and see how things are going?

Anthony Love: Absolutely.

Shawn Liu: Awesome. Awesome. So in the meantime, while the sprint is starting up, it's going to launch soon. They're probably folks listening in who are like, "Anthony, Shawn, Allison, all that's well and good. How do me, Jane Q, John Q, member of the public help out? I want to get involved, but I'm probably not going to be one of those communities with the sprint is happening. But how do I help?"

Anthony Love: A very easy thing to do if you know of a Veteran that is homeless or even at imminent risk of homelessness, you can call our call center at (877) 424-3838. Everyone with a phone can do that to ensure that Veteran gets connected to services.

If you are a housing partner or a landlord, we will implore you to accept the HUD VASH vouchers from our Veterans, or even consider setting aside some units for low income Veterans and their families. If you are a builder, develop some housing units for these low income families.

If you are an employment partner, if you have [00:20:00] positions, strongly consider hiring a Veteran who is exiting homelessness. Work with our local VA medical center who community employment coordinators.

And then, I would just say too, if you're just like, "Look, I'm a regular guy, I'm a regular girl. I don't have buildings or employment," consider volunteering either with a program within your community that works with Veterans, volunteer at your local VA medical center, with organizations that do outreach and so forth.

If you'd like to write, write a letter to the editor, letting everyone in your community know ending veteran homelessness is important.

Shawn Liu: We're going to put links to all of those in the description as well. Links for landlords to rent to veterans, links to business owners to hire veterans, links to volunteer at your local VA. And of course we always have the call center number as well if you're a Veteran homeless or at risk of homelessness.

Alison, same question to you, but maybe more from a human to human interaction approach. If somebody finds themselves face to face with an unsheltered Veteran, we know about the call center, but are there other tips or helpful things to do if they're face to face right now with a [00:21:00] Veteran who's currently on the street, maybe they're under a bridge, maybe you're walking by their tent.

Any tips for them?

Allison Bond: People are going to have different comfort levels with this topic, and that's perfectly okay. Also wanted to mention stand downs are also a great way to volunteer. Wonderful 1 to 3 day events usually put on by the community, but VA is present. All kinds of services are available for Veterans.

Shawn Liu: I'm going to put a link to the events page into the description.

So the funny thing, like you are vying with the Veterans Justice programs as having the most links in a podcast. I think it's, we're going to, I'm going to tally them up after and see who wins, but yeah, we'll put a link to the events page with the standouts into the description too.

Allison Bond: Great opportunity to get involved with Stand Down. Lots of upcoming events. So check out that website for sure. But, you know, if you find yourself face to face with an unsheltered veteran, there's a couple of different things you can do.

One, if you want to, in your car, carry bottled water. Hot days out, hand out a bottle of [00:22:00] water.

We had a call with a lot of our outreach workers, and we were just picking their brains, what are some of the ways that you engage and make that initial contact with unsheltered Veterans. And, one of the ideas was to have pet food in their bag. I thought that was an amazing way to make contact. Animals are a great conversation starter. And actually I just recently found out my mom carries dog food in her car and sells dog food to people and I thought that was really cool. So go mom.

The other theme that we heard constantly was offering hope. Instilling this very basic hope and empowerment, acknowledging that they're a person. Waving, smiling, not ignoring.

It's just something that I try to teach my son when we're in the car. It doesn't take anything to just say, hi. This offering hope thing just came up over and over again when we were talking to the outreach workers. And making sure that they're aware of the resources, getting the message out there [00:23:00] that there is hope there is help at the local VA.

Shawn Liu: Yeah, great points. Great points.

I'm going to go ahead and start winding us down. Close with a tradition on our show, especially for folks who are here for their first time. Closing with why.

I myself am not a Veteran. None of us here, the trio that we are, we're not Veterans either.

And whenever I've worked out in, whether it was outreach to Veterans who were experiencing homelessness or in our permanent housing programs, the Veterans want to know that this isn't just another job for me. Like I'm not just here collecting a paycheck, but I'm here for the mission, that I'm devoted to them.

Allison, let's start with you. As we close out today's episode, what's your why for this work?

Allison Bond: So I have two whys. First, my dad is an army Veteran and served boots on the ground in Vietnam. So I am very passionate about serving the Veteran population to begin with. And secondly, I've been serving the homeless Veteran population since 2006. And I have witnessed so many individuals who

have gone from living outdoors under bridges and tents [00:24:00] to finding homes and have completely transformed their lives.

And in most cases, that started with a drop of kindness, a bit of hope, just somebody reaching out. And so I've seen the impact that we can make. I know the power of the work that we do.

Shawn Liu: Anthony, how about you? What's your why for this work?

Anthony Love: Like Alison, I've been doing this work for quite some time. I'm a little bit older than Allison. I've been doing this work since 1996. Originally I just came in and it was a job for me. But my why started when I was running a program in Houston. And this one Veteran came in, with just a clothes on his back.

Fast forward to about three years later. I'm on a train in Houston, going to work, and I hear someone say, "Mr. Love." I turn around, and it's this Veteran. And he's engaged to be married. He's getting ready to buy a home, and I've been hooked ever since. It just brought me so much joy to be able to help this individual who is so deserving, that I can't let it go.

And here I am 27 years later, still fighting the good fight for these men and women who [00:25:00] have born in the battle who has given their all.

I have roughly seven uncles who are Veterans. And they remind me who I'm fighting for.

Shawn Liu: Allison Bond is the Deputy Director for the Health Care for Homeless Veterans Program and Anthony Love is the Principal Advisor for Inter and Intra Agency Collaboration and Director of Community Engagement here in the Homeless Programs Office.

Allison, Anthony, thank you so much for the gifts of your time.

Anthony Love: Thank you for having me.

Allison Bond: 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 www.va.gov/Homeless. And if you're a Veteran who is 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, seven days a week.

That number again is 877-424-3838.

That's all for this month. We hope that you found this time to [00:26:00] 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. All