

EVH - S1EP18 - On Homeless Prevention and Rapid Rehousing through Supportive Services for Veteran Families

Nikki Barfield: [00:00:00] So essentially our program really is designed to help Veterans who have very low incomes sustain themselves, help them prevent becoming homeless, as well as helping them identify more suitable housing for themselves and their families whenever is needed.

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 number again is 877-424-3838.

If you've been listening to this [00:01:00] show for a while now, you've been introduced to the massive bowl of alphabet soup that is VA's homeless programs.

So many acronyms and initialisms representing so many different benefits, resources, and services which serve as the backbone for the federal government's response to ending Veteran homelessness. Now, we've tried our best to simplify all of this bureaucracy so that as we share it with you, it's easy to understand. That it's free of the government gobbledygook as possible so that if you ever find yourself in need of the services, you know what to expect.

Whenever I do presentations on VA homeless programs, I tell folks, "I don't want you to feel like you need to be an expert on all this stuff just to be able to use it."

Making sure these programs work right for you, that's our job. That's on us. I want you just to know that they exist and that they're ready for you should you ever need them.

So, for this month's episode, I'd like to let you know about a resource that has been somewhat [00:02:00] of a Swiss Army knife in VA's work to support homeless and at risk Veterans.

It can do a lot of different things, from rapidly rehousing Veterans who are homeless, to preventing Veterans from becoming homeless in the first place. From providing rental subsidies, to childcare, to legal services. From incentivizing landlords to rent to our Veterans, to providing comfort items that turn apartments into homes.

Now, you may be thinking, "Uh, what sorcery is this, and how can I get connected?"

Those are really great questions.

So, to help us learn about one of VA's most versatile tools to end Veteran homelessness, I can think of no one better to talk to than our very own Nikki Barfield.

Ms. Barfield is the deputy director of Supportive Services for Veteran Families, or SSVF, where she supports the program's daily operations.

Let's just jump right into it. Nikki, welcome to the show.

Nikki Barfield: Hi, Shawn. Thanks so much for having me. I've never heard our program referred to as a Swiss Army knife. That's pretty [00:03:00] good.

Shawn Liu: Yeah we might try to make that stick.

Nikki Barfield: Yeah, no, sounds, sounds good.

Shawn Liu: So before we get into what Supportive Services for Veteran Families is, and the services that it provides. Why don't you tell us a little bit about yourself?

Nikki Barfield: I'm actually a Licensed Clinical Social Worker licensed in the State of Florida. I'm based in the State of Florida, but our Supportive Services for Veterans program is a national community-based program, and I've been the Deputy Director since about September, 2021. So right at about a couple of years.

Essentially what I do is I support anything that has to do with our Supportive Services for Veterans Families Programs, or SSVF programs. So likely anything that's related to the program, I have a hand in it.

Shawn Liu: Now I want to acknowledge for our listeners, a lot of times when they think about VA programs and services, we're usually talking about government employees who work out of maybe the VA hospital, or outpatient clinics, or maybe other offices, doing the work to help homeless Veterans. But if I understand correctly, SSVF is unique in [00:04:00] that it's not VA government employees, but it's actually employees of nonprofit organizations that have been awarded grants to actually provide these services.

Nikki Barfield: Yeah, so SSVF is actually, as you said, kind of unique in that our program is very community based, meaning that the services that are provided in our program are actually provided by local nonprofit organizations as well as consumer cooperatives who have experience in providing the services we'd like for them to provide.

So essentially our program really is designed to help Veterans who have very low incomes sustain themselves, help them prevent becoming homeless, as well as helping them identify more suitable housing for themselves and their families whenever is needed.

While my office provides oversight of the grantees, the direct work done in the SSVF program is actually a community-based effort provided by our local nonprofits.

Shawn Liu: That makes sense, [00:05:00] actually. And I imagine when we think about trying to do this work at scale, meaning that we are all over the country and providing services to all of the Veterans that may need it, being able to mobilize even more staff through nonprofits and consumer collaboratives is really important. I imagine that there might be some nonprofits out there who are listening to this for the first time and wondering, "Oh, wow. Uh, that might be something that we might want to get into."

So how do non-profits and consumer collaboratives, how do they actually apply for these grants and get awarded? Like, how are grantees selected?

Nikki Barfield: That's a great question. So, as with any federal grant opportunities, we post what we call a Notice of Funding Available in various places. But the two places, I think most folks are aware of is what we call the Federal Register, or a website called Grants.gov.

So what we do is we post that Notice out, and it [00:06:00] explains what it is that we're looking to provide and gives the nonprofits who may potentially apply an idea of how much funding they could receive if they want to compete for the funding. Once that NOFA, that Notice of Funding Available, is out on that Federal Register, and that Grants.gov, organizations can decide to submit what we call as a grant application. We also offer a lot of webinars and technical assistance to help potential applicants develop their application. But they do have to submit it by a very strict deadline. Once that deadline has passed, the applications are reviewed by some trained reviewers and scored. If they meet the minimum threshold, they can essentially be funded.

So what we do from there is we actually look at the geographic locations and we look at the needs for particular communities, and we recommend award decisions based on that information.

The VA Secretary eventually announces the awards, and then my office [00:07:00] will help grantees, those new grantees or those continuing grantees continue to provide services, or we also can help them with starting to provide the services.

Very proud to say, Shawn, I do wanna share that we actually, our office actually can provide SSVF services all over the United States. That means we cover every state. We cover every territory, including Guam and San Juan, as well as the District of Columbia. So we have a very robust operation that we provide services through our nonprofit organizations.

Shawn Liu: So when does actually all of this stuff with the new Notices of Funding Available and the grant awards, when do that actually take place? I know that a couple of months ago, I believe it was August, your office actually announced the award at basically nearly \$800 million in SSVF grants for the upcoming fiscal year, which will actually, I think take place by around when this episode airs. So how does the actual timing work for all of this?

Nikki Barfield: Yeah we're really excited about those, [00:08:00] what we call FY 24 awards because it is given us the opportunity actually expand our program. We actually have several new grantees that are new to the program that be starting to provide services. So really excited to support them as well as continue supporting those existing grantees that will continue receiving funding.

Typically the Notice of Funding Available that I mentioned earlier, comes out right in the fall, October, November, with a deadline of around February and again that deadline is very firm. If you keep an eye on that Grants.gov website,

you'll see when it's out as well as some some links to provide some technical assistance to help applicants. We are not sure at this time if we're going to be expanding for new grantees or not, but I strongly suggest everyone to please just keep an eye on that Grants.gov and read the criteria. And that lets you know what we'll be looking for in that particular grant round.

Shawn Liu: Awesome. So we're going to make sure that we put links to the Grants.gov in the description of this [00:09:00] episode. So you can check it out and monitor it. We'll also put a link to your main website. I know you put grant notices there too, and have a lot of actual great resources for our grantees.

All right. I want to shift gears a little bit now, Nikki, and move away from the grantees and the nonprofits and over to the Veterans. Because there may be Veterans who are listening in is like, "Okay, all this is well and good. That sounds like government bureaucracy. Uh, talk to me about the services, but most importantly, talk to me about eligibility. How do I know if I'm eligible as a Veteran for these benefits and services that I may need?"

Nikki Barfield: There's nothing more frustrating than having a need but getting turned down because you're not eligible for that service, because that doesn't mean that need goes away. You've just been told no. And then you're sitting in a situation of what do I do next?

So we try to be as transparent as possible about who is eligible for our SSVF program. So essentially you have to be a Veteran[00:10:00] or you have to be a member of a family in which the head of the household or the spouse is a Veteran. You have to have served at least one day of active duty and you must have a military discharge that's anything other than dishonorable. Outside of that, you could be eligible for SSVF services. Now there are particular services that our SSVF grantees provide that do have income limitations. And generally that income limitation is that they can't exceed 80% of what we call the Area Median Income. And that's based by HUD guidelines. And that's . We're getting a little bit technical here, but the local communities do have income guidelines, and generally it's no more than 80% of that Area of Median Income. And we also want you to be experiencing or be at imminent risk of homelessness. But again, If you're not eligible for some of the services that our grantees provide, that [00:11:00] doesn't mean that they can't help you with providing other types of services.

So I really encourage individuals who are in need or interested in the SSVF program to really reach out to our grantees to allow them to do an intake to see

what you could potentially be eligible for. Our goal is to help everyone who is at imminent risk of homelessness and not to turn people away.

Shawn Liu: One of the other things I think is neat about SSVF and it's right there in the title, and you said it too, that it's not just about serving the Veteran, but the Veteran's family, their household. And that means you can serve way more people and have a lot of these downstream, positive impacts on that household.

Nikki Barfield: Yeah. And, and, And the one thing I wanna also add is that, you know, that Veteran defines what their household is. If we have a Veteran who has a long time partner, they may not be legally, but they've they've been together for a while, if that Veteran [00:12:00] determines that that partner is a part of their household, then we would also be able to serve that partner also.

Shawn Liu: Okay. I want to circle back really quickly on something that you said about the discharge status, because, for those who might be familiar with VA health care eligibility, that usually requires Veterans having a General or Honorable discharge. And depending on when you were discharged a certain number of days of active duty.

But if I heard correctly what you described is actually broader where it's any discharge other than Dishonorable and at least one day of active duty. Uh, that's pretty broad. Did I hear that correctly?

Nikki Barfield: You did, correct!. The unique thing about our program is you may be a Veteran who is, are not eligible for VA healthcare services for a variety of reasons that does not preclude you from being eligible for SSVF services.

Shawn Liu: That feels pretty powerful, right? Like there's this idea that some of our most vulnerable Veterans, Veterans who may be at [00:13:00] most risk of homelessness, the things that make them at greater risk of homelessness may also be the things that have contributed to having a shortened active duty time of service or discharge status other than General or Honorable. And, you know, if you have those circumstances as well, and you're a greater risk of homelessness, but you might not be eligible for the services, that doesn't serve anybody literally and figuratively. So if I understand correctly, the SSVF eligibility is broader to really address the risk factors that may have stemmed from or contributed to those other discharged statuses and thus creating greater access to Veterans who may need it the most.

Nikki Barfield: Exactly, exactly, Shawn.

Shawn Liu: Okay, so we've covered, coverage where SSVF is across the country and how different non-profits can become grantees. We've covered Veteran eligibility. Let's shift gears again and talk about the actual services that [00:14:00] SSVF provides. What are the concrete things? That Veterans can receive when they participate with SSVF.

Nikki Barfield: We expect our grantees to really base service needs on what the individual needs. Like there is really no one size fits all approach when people are homeless or their experiencing risk to homelessness, they could have a variety of needs.

So we don't want Veteran A to be treated the same way as Veteran B. We want them to have an individualized assessment and we want them to deploy whatever services are unique to that Veteran or that Veteran's household situation.

As I mentioned earlier, they could be financial resources such as short term rental deposits, utility assistance, emergency housing, transportation, or there could be non-financial services, outreach, case management services, accessing VA [00:15:00] benefits as well as mainstream benefits, providing some legal services.

So we really want our grantees, the people that we provide funding to, to conduct individualized assessments and use what we call a progressive engagement approach to provide whatever the minimum amount of services are needed for that Veteran or that Veteran household to help them resolve their situation.

Shawn Liu: Nikki, there's a relatively new service that SSVF has been providing over the last couple years that may not have gotten a lot of attention, but I'd love to maybe get some more information about. It's specifically something called Shallow Subsidy. And if I understand correctly, it's a new kind of component, not a new program. But a new component within SSVF that allows you to provide some different type of assistance in contrast to the traditional SSVF services that you just kind of mentioned. Can you tell us a little bit about what Shallow Subsidy is?

Nikki Barfield: Yeah. Thank you for allowing me to [00:16:00] be able to just simplify it because I, I do wanna explain this in a non-technical way. The reality is, is affordable housing across the country, and I'd venture to say in most

communities, locating affordable housing units, it's challenging. It's challenging. But when you have individuals and not just Veterans, but when you have individuals who have a fixed income, they have the highest risk of becoming homeless.

We're seeing a lot of individuals who have had fixed income, have been there for many years. The landlords have found an opportunity to receive additional money, not renew individual's lease. And when you're on a fixed income, locating another affordable housing unit, it's, it's just really, really challenging.

Shallow subsidy will allow our SSVF grantees to pay a Veteran household's rent actually up to 50% of their rent, up to half of their rent for up to two years. [00:17:00] It's a two-year commitment. So during that two-year period, while the grantees are paying up to 50% of that Veteran household's rent, that individual or that Veteran household can work on ways to increase their income so they can sustain paying their rent after that two-year period. But it gives them that breathing room, that breathing room to figure out what the next steps are.

I'm certainly not an economist, but I don't think that affordable housing crisis is gonna end anytime soon. And if we can give an opportunity for that Veteran household to breathe to figure out what they can do and help prevent them from entering into our homeless system, that is what Shallow Subsidy is designed to do.

Shawn Liu: Awesome. Really, really appreciate that summary.

Okay. As we start winding down this episode, let's talk about calls to action. Most importantly, how do Veterans get connected to SSVF? If after listening to this episode, they're like, "Oh yeah, that's [00:18:00] me. I need these resources."

Nikki Barfield: Yeah, so just like the National Call Center, National Call Center actually has a list of all of our grantees. But if you don't wanna call the National Call Center, you can always Google SSVF. Most of our grantees have websites. My office's main webpage, which is, it's kind of long, but it's www.va.gov/Homeless/SSVF. There's a link on there that says, Locate an SSVF Provider. It has all of the grantees information, what areas they served, and you can contact them directly. Or you can send an email to my office at SSVF@va.gov and we can also provide you with a list of how you can locate that community-based provider that's providing SSVF services.

Shawn Liu: Outstanding. We're going to put links to all of those into description, the SSVF website, the SSVF "Locate an SSVF Provider" page, the [00:19:00] links to Grants.gov, your email. I also know one of our partners, at Community Solutions have developed a fantastic, web-based resource locator that includes SSVF grantees. So we'll put a link to that into the description as well.

Okay. Fantastic.

Nikki, as we bring this episode to a close, I want to end with a tradition that's on our show. I want to end with "why."

Now folks who've been listening in for the last year and a half, two years of this podcast know that I'm not a Veteran, but that when I rep for Veterans as part of the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, it's important for me to convey that I'm here for them. I'm here for the mission. I'm not just collecting a paycheck or this isn't just another job, but that I'm dedicated to this work.

So as we close this episode for this month, what's your, why?

You like many of my guests on this show are a hyper-competent person. You could be working as a social worker in a variety of other different settings. Why are you working here for homeless [00:20:00] Veterans?

Nikki Barfield: I certainly don't wanna sound like a cliché, but I've actually always had a desire to help others. I mean, I think I knew I wanted to be a social worker from when I was in high school. My major was social work from the very beginning. Now it took me a long while to get through the social work program, but my major actually stayed the same. And honestly, it's because I have a desire to help people. And as I got older, that desire has always been there. But man, that focus on helping marginalized individuals just really, really just grew stronger.

I'm actually a firm believer that you don't have to actually experience a crisis or trauma in order to empathize those who have. So if I can use my voice and actions to help anybody with any situation, I will do it. I want the world to know that help is healthy, and my work here in the VA will not be done until every Veteran is housed.

Shawn Liu: Nikki Barfield is the deputy director of the [00:21:00] Supportive Services for Veterans Families program here in the Homeless Programs Office

of the Department of Veterans Affairs. Nikki, thank you so much for the gift of your time.

Nikki Barfield: All right. Thanks so much for having me, Shawn. Take care.

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'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, seven days a week. That number again is 877-424-3838.

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

That's all for this month. 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.[00:22:00]