

EVA S1EP19 - Improving Access and Outcomes for Women Veterans

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Lourdes Tiglao: Women Veterans need to see themselves reflected in the spaces and places that they seek help. They don't come to VA because everything's all great and well. They're coming because they need something. There is a point of vulnerability. And so to make sure that the environment that they go to when they're already feeling in a vulnerable state, that we're making that a welcoming environment, so that they don't feel that they have to be guarded in order to come here to seek help.

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 [00:01:00] 877-424-3838.

At VA, we say the words homeless and Veteran should not exist together. Like it shouldn't even be in our nation's lexicon at all. And there's been significant progress to make that a semantic reality. See, according to the US Department of Housing and Urban Development data show that on a single night in January of 2022, there were 33,129 Veterans who experienced homelessness in the U.S.

This reflects a more than 55% reduction in Veteran homelessness since 2010, and is also a somewhat unprecedented achievement in our nation's history. But if you've been listening to the show for a while now, you can probably guess that the situation is way more nuanced and complex.

You see, there's a lot of energy among homeless service providers around this concept of "disaggregating your data. Now that word [00:02:00] disaggregate, it's just fancy speak for separating something into its different parts.

So if we take, for example, the number of Veterans experiencing homelessness on a single night in America, disaggregating your data means separating that big

number into smaller numbers that each the smaller numbers represent different Veteran subpopulation.

So maybe disaggregating by race and ethnicity to see how many of those Veterans are whites, how many are Black or African American, how many are Native American, et cetera. If you were to disaggregate by geography, you may see how many of those Veterans lived on the East Coast versus how many live on the West Coast.

And if you were to disaggregate by gender, you'd see how many of those Veterans were men, how many were women, how many were non-binary or transgender and so on.

We are told by our stakeholders over, and over, and over, and over again, "Y'all. You gotta disaggregate your data!" And there's a good reason to do so.

[00:03:00] What if some members of your community aren't experiencing the same improvements over time as others? Wouldn't you wanna know?

What if some members of a population are experiencing worse outcomes? Wouldn't you wanna know?

And for us at VA, what if the programs and services we provide aren't as accessible or effective for some of the people we serve? Wouldn't we want to know?

I certainly would. And when it comes to Women Veterans, our office did just that.

Now, hold onto your hats for a sec, because I'm gonna dive into some numbers. It's gonna feel like a lot, but I swear to you it's important.

Okay. We took a look at the number of women Veterans who experienced homelessness based on that same Housing and Urban Development data, publicly available data might I add, from 2018 to 2022. For context, overall homelessness among Veterans declined during that time period by about 12% from around 38,000 Veterans in [00:04:00] 2018 to just over 33,000 Veterans in 2022. During that same time period, 2018 to 2022, homelessness among women Veterans actually increased by 7% from 3,219 Veterans in 2018 to 3,440 Veterans in 2022. And this increase was mostly among women who experienced unsheltered homelessness. So think living literally on the streets, literally in the woods, in encampments, under bridges.

By contrast, homelessness among male Veterans decreased during that same time period by nearly 15%.

So to make the numbers plain, homelessness among women Veterans increased while homelessness among male Veterans decreased.

Now acknowledging all of the known limitations and caveats on the methodology around gathering this specific source data, and acknowledging that percentage increases and decreases over time, all of that depends on which [00:05:00] specific years you're comparing on the whole, this is pretty distressing.

Simply put, we cannot truly end Veteran homelessness if we don't end it for all Veterans.

So do we gotta do? What do we have to do to make sure our women Veterans are accessing our homeless programs and services just as effectively as our male Veterans? And are there some unique challenges and barriers that women Veterans face when accessing those services?

Shawn Liu: Those really great questions.

So to help us learn more about how VA can improve our access to housing resources for women Veterans, I could think of no one better to talk to than our next two guests.

First, we have Lourdes Tiglao, the Director of VA's Center for Women Veterans, where she serves as the primary advisor to the Secretary of VA on the Department's policies and programs and legislation that affects women Veterans. She's also an Air Force Veteran with deployments to Afghanistan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Saudi Arabia, the Philippines, and more.

And today she's joined by Tracy Emmanuel, the Deputy Director for the [00:06:00] Housing and Urban Development-VA Supportive Housing Program, or HUD-VASH, where she is responsible for providing organizational leadership, program development, managerial support, training, and education for HUD-VASH programs nationwide.

Lourdes, Tracy, welcome to the show.

Lourdes Tiglao: Thank you so much. And thanks for having us.

Tracy Emmanuel: Thanks, Shawn. Glad to be here.

Shawn Liu: Yeah, really have you. Okay, so this is gonna be another one of those intersectionality episodes where we're gonna dive into homeless services and homelessness for women Veterans.

I want to kind of acknowledge out of the gate, despite the fact that women are one of the fastest growing Veteran subpopulations in America, we actually still don't have a lot of research on the different barriers, risk factors, facilitators to housing for women Veterans. And so yet again, another episode, we're gonna be basically talking about what we do know, what we're hearing out in the field, and most importantly, what are the things that we need to think about with our service delivery to make sure our programs and services are more accessible.[00:07:00]

But before we get into all of this, let's get to know you both a little bit more. Lourdes, starting with you. Tell us little bit about yourself. Tracy and I are civilians, you are a Veteran and you have a pretty storied career. What's your role been like so far in terms of federal and now today at VA?

Lourdes Tiglao: Thanks so much, Shawn.

This is my first foray actually into government. Before this I was actually in the private sector with Airbnb in the tech sector. And then before that I was actually with Team Rubicon doing disaster response work.

When Covid hit and I was working with Airbnb and trying to tackle providing housing for our healthcare professionals who are trying to help patients with Covid, I have a bit of an early, I guess, peek at what housing might look like and what housing needs are for those who are displaced because of the pandemic at the time.

My work as the Advisor for the Secretary here at VACO is not only to advise, but also to be an advocate, both internally and externally, for our women Veterans. To make sure that everything that we're looking at, we're looking at it with a gendered lens. And then finally making sure that [00:08:00] as we look at these different initiatives and programs across the enterprise, that we are looking at it not only from a single, you hit it in the nail on the head earlier, not looking at it only from a single factor of, "Oh, it's women Veterans."

It's looking at those intersectional identities that has an impact on how some of those self-seeking health behaviors occur. And also making sure that we are

culturally sensitive in how folks actually consume and digest information and who their trusted resources are. And those all have an effect with regard to their identities.

Shawn Liu: Yeah, really important stuff. Really glad to have you on here. I know you I have been chatting just on side about different outreach opportunities or strategies or campaigns to raise awareness of all of the programs and services. And gonna talk about why there might be some specific barriers that women Veterans face, not just accessing homeless services, but just any or all VA services as well. And what the things that we need to tweak, adjust, and tailor our activities to be more accessible to women Veterans.

Tracy [00:09:00] wanna get know you little bit better. You've been promoted recently. You're now the new Deputy Director of the HUD-VASH Program. Congratulations. Tell us a little bit about yourself and your current role.

Tracy Emmanuel: Thanks Shawn. Really excited to see all the great work you're doing with this podcast and happy to be here. So yep. I am the new deputy director for our HUD-VASH program. Formally I was the HUD-VASH Regional Coordinator, providing support to several of the regions across the country from the Midwest to the West Coast, providing technical assistance, policy clarification, really helping local communities understand barriers to getting Veterans leased up, and how we can break down barriers. Really looking at how the services that we provide impact the human beings that we're in charge with serving.

I've been with the VA for about 12 years and I've worked in and across all of our Homeless Programs that we have here at the VA. I've also had the opportunity to work from the big city here in Chicago, several cities across the West Coast, and also had the opportunity [00:10:00] to work in rural areas. I've done some work with Tribal HUD-VASH, so really able to understand how geography impacts people's ability to access services. And then what our response should be in terms of delivery of those services.

Shawn Liu: Outstanding stuff. And you and I are a part of a crew in our Homeless Programs Office who come from clinical work. We've actually done a lot of the work to actually outreach to Veterans, get them into temporary settings, get them into permanent housing settings, and support them as they work to get stably housed.

You and I come from a lot of experience with doing this work out with actual Veterans and thus using that information to inform policy, technical assistance, training, all that stuff.

Really, really excited for you and excited for us have you on the show.

Okay. Let's go ahead and dive on in.

Lourdes, I want to come back over to you. Let's talk about women Veterans generally before we narrow down into homelessness. We just had a motto change, changing the words to Lincoln's promise to be more [00:11:00] inclusive, specifically honoring the sacrifice and service of not just women Veterans, but all Veterans, who may not necessarily have felt, represented in the original motto of the agency. And that's just kind like one step. There are a lot of other things that we need to do from making sure we have non-discrimination policies at our medical centers, to having culturally competent and aware providers to make sure our programs and services are accessible. But tell us from your larger vantage point, what are you seeing as some of the barriers that women Veterans face when accessing services from us at VA?

Lourdes Tiglao: Yeah, great question. Since I've started, and even when I transitioned over to become a Veteran after my service, one of the biggest barriers still that we've seen is women Veterans self-identifying as a woman Veteran. It's a sense of identity that keeps 'em sometimes from even looking or asking for help. Many women Veterans think that because they didn't retire, or they didn't deploy, or they didn't have a particular specific occupational specialty that's at the tip of the [00:12:00] spear, that they don't feel like they can be called a Veteran.

That's the furthest from the truth. Any women who have worn the cloth of this nation is a Veteran. Only 1% of our nation's population serves in the military, and they've earned those benefits and the services that we provide. We as a nation, our calling, our cause, our obligation is to make them whole after they return.

Another thing that I've heard a lot about is feeling that they're dismissed by their healthcare provider. And I don't think that actually that's unique to VA.

And finally, especially for those women who have dependents, children, there's still a lot of myths out there that you can't ask for housing support because they will take your children away. And it couldn't be further from the truth.

All of these various myths that circulate out there are sometimes the things that prevent women Veterans from asking for help because they want to make sure that they keep their families whole.

And those are just some that are top of my head that keep women Veterans from not only reaching out, but even identifying as a woman Veteran.

Shawn Liu: Yeah, those are [00:13:00] really, really important points and I imagine just scratches the surface of the full range of barriers that women Veterans may face. And you touched on really important thing, just the whole self-identification part as well, which we kind of take for granted maybe as service providers, but is so foundational to access.

I remember last year we actually interviewed a woman Veteran who was receiving our homeless programs and services. And when she told us about her story, she said, "I didn't think I was eligible for any of this stuff. Like, does any this apply to me? I thought I was too young to be a Veteran. I thought I might have to be older." As if the concept of being Veteran was somebody in their forties, fifties, or sixties. But she served.

And we see this a lot, that when you change the way you ask the question, if you do a subtle shift from saying, "Are you a Veteran," to "Have you served in the armed forces," or "Have you served in the military," the self-identification rates go up. They skyrocket which is amazing.

And you touched on another point that's really, really critical and spoilers for later in the [00:14:00] show, we're gonna talk about HUD-VASH, the women who have dependents or minor children in their household, and a conception or maybe misperception that homeless services number one, will take your kids away if you just in need help, which is, again, not true, but also two, that a lot our shelters, and some of this is actually probably true, may not be as accessible or appropriate for households with minor children. And so these are really, really important topics that part of reason that we brought Tracy on today, is to touch on just some of the different programs that VA does have that is able to not only serve women, but households with minor dependents as well.

Really, really important stuff.

Okay. Let's shift gears a little bit and talk maybe proactive. What are the things that you've been seeing that VA has been doing to make our care settings, accessing our services more welcoming and thus more accessible to women Veterans.

Lourdes Tiglao: Well, you hit one of 'em right off of the bat, which is making the environment more welcoming. VA just celebrated [00:15:00] 100 years of providing healthcare to women Veterans. However, VA has actually been in existence a lot longer than that. But it's only been a hundred years that we've been officially providing healthcare for women Veterans for a variety of reasons. And for some of those who are listening, they might not know that women actually have been serving since the Revolutionary War. It just wasn't necessarily like sanctioned at the time.

Some of the things that have changed. The Deborah Samson Act that passed a couple of years ago, that helped create this own sweeping changes in legislation to make VA not only more proactive in its work on making VA more welcoming, but also increasing the resources that are provided for women's health programs, including funding for women's healthcare providers, providing gender health-specific care, and incorporating that into medical facilities.

With regard to making the VA a lot more welcoming for women Veterans, the I'm Not Invisible program that started back in Oregon, but then brought into VA, this graphical portrait representation of [00:16:00] women Veterans shown across VA facilities. One of the things that's really important about that is that women Veterans need to see themselves reflected in the spaces and places that they seek help. They don't come to VA because everything's all great and well. They're coming because they need something. There is a point of vulnerability. And so to make sure that the environment that they go to when they're already feeling in a vulnerable state, that we're making that a welcoming environment so that they don't feel that they have to be guarded in order to come here to seek help.

And then the last thing that I wanted to touch on is, with CWV, one of the programs that we had started a few years ago is called The Trailblazers Program that acknowledges and recognizes women Veterans in your communities across the nation. This year we just recognized at least two women Veterans from the territories and overseas who have been doing phenomenal work across several areas: mental health, legal, and one of those areas specifically is in homelessness.

And so we're pretty excited because those champions are in your communities. And [00:17:00] those are the people who are also moving the needle along in their own way, through their own activities and their own organizations. But the difference is they are collaborating more closely with VA with regard to advancing those efforts.

Shawn Liu: Quick question, I assume the I Am campaign and the Trailblazers campaign, there's maybe some web resources that we could potentially put hyperlinks to.

Lourdes Tiglao: Yes, www.va.gov/womenvet is our website, and all the links are actually over there.

Shawn Liu: Excellent. We'll put link to that into the description of this episode so folks can check it out. Thank you so much!

Tracy, I'd like to shift gears now and come over to you and start, of narrowing down into the realm of homelessness among women Veterans.

Our last episode in October featured a program, Supportive Services for Veteran Families. And you kind of hear it right in name. That program also is a program that can serve not only women Veterans, Veterans with minor children.

HUD-VASH is another one as well.

We have couple other programs things that provide transitional housing to varying degrees of accessibility [00:18:00] for women Veterans and Veterans with minor children or dependents. But the important takeaway is that there are things that are available. The programs and services that we have are not just for single men. And so if you could share a little bit about what HUD-VASH is so folks can get an idea of what women Veterans can expect if they were to say call our call center, knock on our doors and say, "Hey, I'm homeless and HUD-VASH might be right for me."

Tracy Emmanuel: HUD-VASH is a collaborative program between the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs and the Department of Housing and Urban Development, also known as HUD. Together, HUD and the VA aim to move Veterans and their families out of homelessness into permanent housing. The primary goal of HUD-VASH is moving families rapidly out of homelessness, providing them support while we're doing that.

It's a voucher program that can help Veterans access an apartment in their communities. Maybe whether it's a two flat, a three flat, larger a apartment. Our staff [00:19:00] are there to help with filling out applications that might be needed, both for the apartment and for the Public Housing Authority, which is the entity on the HUD side that operates the voucher. VA, we operate the supportive housing.

We help connect Veterans also to a variety of services.

And so we know Veterans who are coming to us experiencing homelessness oftentimes are so hyper-focused on exiting their experience of homelessness, that they're not able to attend to all of their other needs. Whether it be they wanna quit smoking, whether it's something more serious with their health, our staff are there to help access both care that could happen at the VA. And then also connect to community care based on the Veterans' preference and where they wanna receive their care.

Once a Veteran is housed, HUD-VASH provides direct clinical services in the Veterans home. And so we might have women Veterans who don't want to come to the VA provide their care or talk to their case managers. And so our program does home visits, whether you're a female Veteran or not. We can come into the home, we can help [00:20:00] Veterans come up with their treatment plan. You know, if Shawn, if you're the Veteran, I'd come into your home and say, "Shawn, can you help me understand what it is that you would like to achieve and how can I help you get there?" Sometimes it looks like reunification with other family members. Sometimes it looks like increased employment. Sometimes it looks like finding a way to live out a medical plan that was given to them by their doctor, but they're struggling at how to balance living out that medical plan, maybe with caring for their children. And so how can we help the people that we're serving accomplish the goals that they have for themselves?

We are available to help Veterans who might be aging. We know that we have Veterans that are aging. I don't know about you guys, but I am, and I can feel it every morning. Right? So specifically how do we utilize our vouchers to connect people to the housing that best meets their needs? Because an apartment isn't always the thing that's going to help someone exit homelessness. And so how can we help our Veteran women who are aging, living with [00:21:00] disabilities, sometimes at risk of institutionalized care, solely because of their homeless and medical needs, live safely somewhere else if they had the proper support.

Again, this program, like you both mentioned, it's really can serve any makeup of your family. Sometimes we have single individuals, sometimes we have women with children, fathers with children, sometimes we have multi-generational households where they have experienced homelessness together and we're looking to help them live together as well.

Shawn Liu: Yeah, That's a really good point. And when I do presentations out in the community, and I jokingly say I figuratively, not literally, but figuratively grew up in HUD-VASH, meaning like my formative years in my professional career was predominantly in HUD-VASH. And one of the things that I loved about the program was just how inclusive it was. And you said it right? That by and large, the Veterans themselves really have a broad latitude to stipulate what their household compositions look like. And especially for women who are in same-sex relationships, like this is an accessible program for them as well. You mentioned multi-generational.

Acknowledging [00:22:00] Tracy that, again, we don't have a lot of... We have, we have some research, But it's not as robust as the research for homelessness homelessness among Veterans generally. So given that we do have limited research, what have you and your teams been seeing out there in the real world about the different hurdles that women Veterans face when they're trying to access our services in HUD-VASH, or maybe SSVF or some of our other alphabet soup of programs?

Tracy Emmanuel: Yeah, and Lourdes touched on a few of these. We know that women Veterans can experience, at a higher rate, trauma in the military. And so that could cause a lack of trust in our system, rightfully so. Maybe they've reported it and something didn't happen the way that they desired the outcome to be. Maybe they had a fear and weren't able to report it at all. And so the VA, as an extension of their military service, may not feel like the safest environment to them.

We also have maybe a woman Veteran who has presented to the VA before and it's [00:23:00] predominantly males that are entering the facility obtaining their care. Oftentimes the VA is a safe place for people who are experiencing homelessness, feeling loneliness to come together, to have conversations, to share a meal. And sometimes those gatherings could be largely men. And so women Veterans may have a harder time, in some circumstances, entering the VA to get that care. And so we really wanna look at, like Lourdes talked about, finding ways to make that entrance into the VA safe. For HUD-VASH, it could also look like as a case manager, and I've done this myself multiple times, I've gone down and met that person at the beginning of the driveway at the VA and said, "Hey, I'm gonna walk in here with you. I'm gonna go stand arm-in-arm with you. I'm gonna check you in the front door, walk you to your appointment. I'll sit there with you. Let me help you find this experience to be positive."

You know, it's, it's a big, massive system, the VA right? To expect someone who's never walked into the VA, who's never talked to a service provider, to

[00:24:00] know everything that's available for help, to understand what HUD-VASH is, how to access it, what can it do for their families to know that there are case managers that can just help them navigate filling out applications, maybe accessing SNAP benefits, getting the things that they need to accomplish, what they're trying to do, they don't always understand what's out there. And so podcasts like this are really fun to come on so that we can help people understand what they are.

Also, we really wanna look at the stigma around it. I was talking to a friend of mine the other day when she was congratulating me on my promotion. She's like, "Wow, you really are showing that women can do it all?" And I said, "Yes, but we actually can't do it all." Thinking about this women empowerment of "we can do it all" sometimes comes at the cost of us feeling like we can't ask for help because we're expected to do it all. I can't always keep my house clean. I can't always keep my kids cared for at the level that I want to and have everything I want to in my career without a support system, without people that [00:25:00] care about me. And so my ability just to step back as someone who's been as a social worker for my entire career, asking for help sometimes is hard for me. Maybe I have some trauma and it's led to some substance use. And that substance abuse is impacting my life. I'm having trouble with my job. I'm having trouble with caring for my kids, because as a mom of two little boys, that is a stressful job, right?

And so you've gotta be able to ask for help. And it's not easy for everyone, including myself, who's housed. And so really thinking how the stigma of asking for help, the stigma around mental health, the stigma around not having safe and secure housing.

And then sometimes there can be a layered impact that has some safety issues with it. We have women Veterans who have partners that are not engaging in safe activities, or them themselves are not engaging in safe activities. Maybe there's violence in the home. And so, Lourdes, you talked about this earlier. This fear that if I come forward and talk about [00:26:00] what's happening, I might lose my children or I might be the person who gets in trouble. But knowing that our programs are here to be a safe and judgment free environment to help people navigate, "Okay, what's going on currently? What do you want it to look like, and how can I help you get there? How can I walk alongside you in this path and get you to that safe environment when you're ready for for it."

There's a lot of different hurdles women have to face when they're trying to access services. And so hopefully people are experiencing when they walk in

that door that warm environment. The greeting with a, "Hello welcome to the VA." And so that we can help people get to the right place.

I also wanna add, it doesn't always have to be at a VA medical center. And so the Homeless Program services are vastly and largely about community work. And so how can we meet Veterans out in the communities? I've sat on park benches and provided service before. I've been in alleys in the city of Chicago, right? And so really looking at where can we help a Veteran access [00:27:00] care that might not be sitting at the VA Medical Center. Are they at a shelter and they got 30 minutes 'cause they gotta get their kids to school and get to work? All right, I'm gonna come to that shelter and while you're combing your kids' hair, I'm gonna ask you some questions and start filling out this application for you. Right? Really thinking about ways to bring services to people to make their lives easier as they're trying to exit homelessness into housing.

Shawn Liu: Really great points. And you brought up something that was such a theme on this show. The deep negative impact that stigma has. I know at VA, especially in the context of mental health, we've been focusing on this idea, especially for male Veterans, it's okay to ask for help. And you just gave us a really important reminder that that's a message really for everybody. It's okay to ask for help, but that stigma is just so ever present.

Tracy Emmanuel: Absolutely.

Shawn Liu: Lourdes, wanna come over to you on the same topic about what you are hearing. The barriers and potentially facilitators facing women Veterans experiencing homelessness and housing instability. Now, I know that at the Center for Women Veterans, you actually, every now and again, receive [00:28:00] inquiries asking for help directly from women Veterans themselves.

So not through like proxies or whatever, but just right from the Veterans. And one of the things that you I have touched on over the years, and especially recently, are some of the ways in which say the current federal definition of homelessness, which was originally coded in the McKinney-Vento Act of 1980 something, more recently amended by the HEARTH Act of 2009, I'll put links to both of those in the description because I know somebody's gonna wanna read them, although broad can be limiting or be their own barriers, especially for women who might experience homelessness as couch surfing, but don't have minor children or aren't fleeing a life-threatening situation. And unsheltered settings are definitely not safe and they may also not feel safe in traditional shelter. So it kind of leaves them out on their own.

What other things are you seeing in terms of trends?

Lourdes Tiglao: A lot of the things that we have been seeing is really more about being afraid of identifying that they need help, [00:29:00] especially if they're in a precarious situation with their employment. There's a lot of employers out there that won't employ if you do not have a permanent household. That's one of the ways actually that the public can be helpful is to not discriminate against someone who's like, let's say, living in a shelter. Because employment is one way for them to get out of that situation.

We've seen a trend a bit of those who have dependents, of this reticence of trying to get help. And so instead of reaching out directly to one of the places that provides HUD-VASH, they'll actually come to us through our Facebook or our Twitter and just ask a question softly versus ask a question directly. And so we really try to make sure that we treat all of those inquiries in a way that gets them information and connects them to their local coordinators right away. Whoever that is, whether it's that person or their friend or their family member. 'Cause sometimes we'll actually get family members who will reach out for that Veteran because that Veteran is, [00:30:00] let's say, being stubborn or just don't want to ask for help because they have a lot of pride and they think that it's a failure if you ask for any kind of help for this.

And then I think the last thing that I'd say that we sometimes see as well, in October we had Breast Cancer and Domestic Violence Awareness month. One of the hurdles sometimes that we see for women Veterans is those who are fleeing those dangerous environments that they can't ask for help directly. And so sometimes we will get the hypothetical situation or hypothetical questions. And so as we parse through some of these inquiries, some of these emails or the messages through social media, we always have to look at it with a very discerning eye to be able to parse out like what is an immediate emergency versus oh, this is just someone who's like asking for information.

We really try to be out there in the communities versus just staying here in the DC area. We go out to various communities across the nation, various conferences, forums, town halls because what we don't wanna have happen is that the [00:31:00] Veteran or their families or their communities that they have to come to us. It shouldn't be a pull. Like we should meet them where they're at. And to what Tracy was saying you know, like she goes out like literally right into the community to go and meet them and make those barriers to seeking help as low as possible. Part of it is just the geographic issue, but the other part of it is actually that psychological stigma of like, I'm a failure if I ask for help. I don't get to keep my family if I ask for help. I don't get to keep my job if they

know that I'm homeless. So all of these things are the lenses that we have to look at. And those are the barriers that we have to lower in order to reach and get to all of our women Veterans that potentially need support.

Shawn Liu: Yeah, those are really, really great points. So as we start winding down this episode, I want to shift gears maybe two more times. This next time is going to be about how do we get Veterans connected to help and how can the public get involved?

Lourdes Tiglao: So I'll start with the, how can [00:32:00] they get connected? Whether it's benefits, services, health, anything through our Center, they can just email 00W@va.gov. They can also find us at www.va.gov/womenvet. And the beauty of our Center is we are the advocates for women Veterans, both internally and externally, which means we have the ability also to reach into every administration to get that help that is needed for those women Veterans.

If the support specifically is about healthcare, they can definitely call the women Veterans call center, 1-855-VA-WOMEN.

Our team actually goes out into the communities, across the nation and also to the territories we were in Puerto Rico, to make sure that we are actually meeting our women Veterans and their family members and their caregivers in the communities where they're at.

So what can the public do to better support women? Veterans. I said it earlier, from an employment standpoint, let's try to ensure that we're not discriminating against someone who is in a shelter. Also, you heard earlier I said that self-identification is one [00:33:00] of the biggest, if not the biggest barrier for us. Because if a woman Veteran won't even self-identify that they're a woman Veteran, we cannot connect them to any service. They have to actually like, raise their hand. And so you've probably heard stories about how a woman gets questioned if they park at a Veteran parking space. But the same skepticism doesn't happen with men who park there. And multiply those same types of encounters like a thousand times. Those are all ways it contributes to the erosion of the sense of identity as a woman Veteran.

And so what can we do? One, don't make the assumption that if you see a man and a woman, that it's a man who's a Veteran and a woman is not. The other one is instead of thanking only the one person, thank them both, it's easier and more respectful to actually thank both of them than to only thank one based on our assumptions and our bias. And so that all speaks to that whole lift people up rather than death by a thousand cuts.

And then if you're a woman Veteran or knows someone who is, I can't emphasize this enough tell your story. And [00:34:00] there's two places to tell your story where you can do that. One is with the Library of Congress's Veterans History Project. There's over a hundred thousand stories, and only about seven to 8,000 of them are about women Veterans. The military Women's Memorial is also another one. It's the only memorial in the nation that's dedicated to service women and women Veterans.

Now you're probably asking why is telling that story important? Why is telling my story important or my grandmother's story important? Because our society as a whole still has a long way to go, and we need to have a deeper understanding of who are those who have raised their hands in service to our nation. In our nation there's only one woman Veteran who has received the Medal of Honor - Mary Walker. In our facilities, there's only a handful of our VA medical centers named after Women Veterans. Only 1% of our nation serves and only a fraction of those are women Veterans. And they deserve to be recognized just with the same parity and honor and fervor as we honor our male Veterans.

One thing that I always say when I'm out and about in communities is, [00:35:00] "We cannot be what we cannot see." Whether it's with our eyes or in our minds, young women and girls are looking to how we treat our women Veterans and seeing that will inform them on whether they will join our military. Telling your stories will help them see what it looks like in the future. So women Veterans, they've served since the Revolutionary War up until now and beyond. And they will continue to serve this nation. And so it is up to us to make sure that we honor them as well as we keep the faith and their trust that we make them whole when they come back.

Shawn Liu: " We cannot be what we cannot see." We're going to put links to all of that. The email address, the phone number to the call center, the website, the Library congress, the Women Veterans Memorial. All of that stuff in our description. So you can check them all out. Amazing.

Tracy what about you how do Veterans get connected to Homeless Programs services? How can they get connected to HUD-VASH? And how can the public help out?

Tracy Emmanuel: Yeah, [00:36:00] absolutely. So, Shawn, in the beginning you mentioned our call center number, which I know you're gonna link. The call center number is probably one of the easiest as you can access that from everywhere.

The other way that you can get connected is walking into community partnerships within the community that you're living in, walking into the VA front door and saying, "Hey, can you connect me to the Homeless Program?" You know, if you're having trouble, framing those words because of the trauma that we talked about. Can I talk to a social worker?

Our staff are out there working with the community providers to help understand how to access the VA, understand how to get folks into the VA. We're really working on a No Wrong Door approach to getting into services.

In terms of what the public can do better definitely wanna echo a million times everything that Lourdes said. A couple other things.

Leading with kindness is where I wanna start, right? And so if you are the person who's engaging someone, whether it's a family, a friend, or a stranger, [00:37:00] leading with kindness, right? If you're passing someone who's on the street who may or may not be a Veteran, a simple hello can make the difference between that person feeling good that day and accessing help and that person feeling discarded, right? We wanna treat people the same way we would want our family members to be treated.

Some other concrete ways are thinking through any experiences that come to your door in which you can be a partner in ending Veteran homelessness. Are you a landlord? Can you say yes to housing? Someone who's has experiencing homelessness, someone that has a voucher or is coming with another form of a subsidy. Are you either on a board, an owner, a staff member at one of these facilities that might help someone who is aging, disabled and at risk of institutionalized care, get housing? Such as an assisted living, such as a home in which you might be able to provide what we call medical foster home, which is really helping to wrap intensive medical services around a Veteran in a home [00:38:00] environment and provide care. What are the things that you do in your daily life in which you could be a part of the goal to end homelessness?

Helping to reduce stigma is really important. I bet I could count on a number of hands between the three of us where we have sat in spaces where we have heard people lead with negative commentary, whether it is around military service whether it is their opinions on different conflicts, whether it is on Veterans who are experiencing homelessness, mental health. And so being advocates in those spaces to say, "Hey, I'm really not comfortable with the way that you're talking about someone's neighbor or sister." We really wanna make sure when those opportunities come to you as a community member, as a family member, that

you're reducing that stigma that you're helping people in. You're leading with kindness and grace.

And if you're the owner, if you're a landlord, if you have influence over landlords. Safe, affordable housing. Affordable. Affordable. Affordable. Affordable. Affordable. Can I say the word affordable again? Right? We need more affordable housing accessible to the people[00:39:00] that served our country. So if you have the ability to say yes or rub elbows with the person who can say yes. Your impact to helping to end Veteran homelessness will not be forgotten, and just one unit saying yes is another Veteran's life who were able to positively impact and safely housed.

Shawn Liu: We're gonna make sure that we put links to all of the stuff. We're gonna put the VA locators, you can find your local VA. We're gonna put a resource locator from one of our partners at Community Solutions. Gonna show you hyperlinks to some of our grantees out there. We're gonna put links to our landlord's page if you're landlord.

Links if you are a business owner to hire Veterans. I know Lourdes, you mentioned employment as well. Fantastic stuff.

Okay, we're gonna shift gears one last time. gonna end with tradition that's on this show. We're gonna end with why.

Now I'm not a Veteran. I'm a civilian. I come from a quirky military family, and whenever I've done my work in HUD-VASH in particular, it's been important to impress upon the Veterans that I served, that I'm not just collecting a paycheck.

Like this is not just a job. I'm here for the [00:40:00] mission. I'm here for them. So, Tracy, I wanna begin our close out with you. What's your why for this work? You are a hyper competent woman. You just got promoted to Deputy Director. You're moving and shaking, and yet you're here repping for homeless Veterans, especially women Veterans.

What's your why for this work?

Tracy Emmanuel: My why is that I believe every single human deserves access to safe, affordable housing and their basic needs. There's nothing more powerful than having a rough day and coming home and taking a shower and getting into clean clothes and being able to lay my head down at night. And so I believe that everyone should have access to that.

We have people putting on uniforms every single day, whether they're entering a conflict zone or not putting their life at risk. They're jeopardizing some of the time that they have with their family, right? I get to go to my kids' soccer game. There's somebody serving right now that doesn't have that ability. And so as a civilian who didn't [00:41:00] serve, it is my privilege. It is my duty to do what I can to help folks access housing.

I come from a long line of military... You know, my grandfather served in the World Wars. My, you know, dad was deployed. My uncles. When I look around at my friends, I've got multiple people actively serving. And actually most of my friends that are serving are women Veterans that are currently in and have the longest careers of everyone that I know within the military. And they all have kids, right?

And so being here to say, I got you when you get out, means something to me because they got me now. Whatever we are doing in our services helps folks get the best care that they need and deserve with the dignity and respect and kindness that we can give them.

Shawn Liu: Lourdes, I'm gonna give you the last word. You're an Air Force Veteran with many, many, many years, a storied history and storied career of federal service. And in this season of your life, you're here with us repping for women Veterans. What's your why for this work?

Lourdes Tiglao: I feel like just a mic drop for Tracy's comments earlier. [00:42:00] What my bio didn't say is that I'm actually an immigrant to this country. And actually I joined the military before becoming a citizen. When I finally became a citizen, I actually had to fight for that. When I came back from Afghanistan in 2002, I was denied my application because I missed my interview. And so I had to fight for that to finally get my citizenship. But all of the opportunities all of the steps and the careers and the experiences that I've had could not have happened without my experiences in the military. And as a woman Veteran who have had not only the opportunity but the privilege not only to serve, but also to be able to continue beyond my service in uniform and after, by doing disaster response.

So I'm drawn to work that helps humanity. This is personal to me because my story is only one story of a million stories of other women Veterans. The question of was I smart enough? 'Cause I came here, didn't speak the language. Am I enough to even become a citizen when I [00:43:00] was denied the first time? Have I done enough to be called a Veteran? So all of these questions I had to ask myself as I was transitioning through. Some or all of these questions have

been asked by other women Veterans, and my part here is to ensure that they know that they are enough and that we're here to support them.

Shawn Liu: Lourdes Tiglao is the director of VA Center for Women Veterans and Tracy Emmanuel is the Deputy Director of the HUD-VASH Program here in Homeless Programs Office.

Lourdes, Tracy, thank you so much for the gifts of your time.

Tracy Emmanuel: Thank you for having us.

Shawn Liu: If you wanna know more about the services that VA provides to Veterans experiencing homelessness and housing instability, visit us online www.va.gov/Homeless. And you're Veteran who's Homeless or at risk of homelessness, reach out. Call National Call Center for Homeless Veterans at 877-424-3838. Trained counselors are standing by to help 24 hours a day, seven days week. That number again is [00:44:00] 877-424-3838.

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

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

Take care.