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[00:00:00] **Jill Albanese:** I have seen and personally experienced how these kinds of programs can help someone. So, I strongly believe in what we're doing. I know that it works. If you have stable housing, everything else will fall into place.

[00:00:16] **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.

[00:00:25] 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, seven days a week.

[00:00:44] That number again is 877-424-3838.

[00:00:53] According to the Department of Housing and Urban Development between 2010 and 2020, the number of Veterans experiencing [00:01:00] homelessness in the United States was cut roughly in half. In half! That's a really big deal! But despite this progress, data also show that, since 2016, progress towards ending Veteran homelessness has stalled.

[00:01:15] Digging deeper, we see that Veteran homelessness declined by 47% between 2010 and 2016, but by only 6% between 2016 and 2020. So, to support, revitalize and streamline VA's commitment to ending Veteran homelessness, this past February VA, Secretary Denis McDonough established a nationwide goal for VA to place 38,000 homeless Veterans into permanent housing by December 31st, 2022.

[00:01:46] That is also a really big deal and will be the focus of VA's homeless programs for the rest of this year. But what does all this mean? Where did this 38,000 number come from? What does VA actually do to [00:02:00] place Veterans into permanent house? What is permanent housing? How do Veterans get connected? And how can listeners like you help?

[00:02:08] Those are all great questions. And to help answer them, I could think of no one better than my very own boss, Jill Albanese. Ms. Albanese is also the Director of Business Operations for the VHA Homeless Programs Office, where

she is responsible for managing the office's daily operations. And she's also a member of the leadership team supporting local VA homeless programs in achieving the Secretary's goal.

[00:02:30] Ms. Albanese has spent her career advocating for affordable housing and improving social policies for homeless families. She believes that making housing affordable to everybody is both socially and fiscally responsible. As the Director of Business Operations, Ms. Albanese carries out strategic plans and develops actions that propel the department's mission of ending Veteran homelessness forward.

[00:02:50] Jill, welcome to the show.

[00:02:51] **Jill Albanese:** Hey, thank you, Shawn. Happy to be here.

[00:02:54] **Shawn Liu:** Yeah. So glad to have you here. This is going to be a big focus for us throughout [00:03:00] 2022. And so, I'm so grateful that you can take some time out of your day to chat with us about this goal and what it means for Veterans and basically the public as a whole.

[00:03:08] But before we get into that, I want to explore a little bit about who you are, how you got into VA, and your current role in the Homeless Programs Office.

[00:03:16] **Jill Albanese:** Yeah, happy to do so. If I could back up just a tiny bit and I promise I won't go on and on. Just to kind of talk about how I got into not only working for the VA, but just working in homeless services in general.

[00:03:28] When I was actually going to undergraduate school, I had no intention of becoming a social worker. But I took a class in social work because it was a class that was available and it kind of gave me one of those extra social science credits that I needed. As part of that class, we had to volunteer at an agency.

[00:03:45] I did that as part of that class. And I happened to volunteer at an organization that had... it was a meal site. They served lunch every day to folks who many of them were homeless. And many were just folks who, you know, who couldn't afford meals. [00:04:00] That experience was life-changing for me.

[00:04:04] Just to have that opportunity to really get to know people and to help them. I fell in love with social work and decided I was going to change my

major to social work and really wanted to pursue working in the field with folks who were homeless. I graduated. I went to work for that same nonprofit organization after I got my master's degree.

[00:04:22] And that organization allowed me to do a lot of community organizing, which in my opinion is the best job in the world. It was such a great job! As part of that work, I was working closely with the homeless liaison at the Department of Veterans Affairs. And he approached me and said, “Hey, we are going to start this new program called HUD-VASH. It’s supportive housing.

[00:04:46] Would you be interested in applying for that job?” And I was like, well, no, I don't, I don't want to work for the federal government. But when I read the job description and realized that this was going to be what the VA was doing – the VA was going to start [00:05:00] housing Veterans in permanent supportive housing.

[00:05:02] I said, “oh yeah, this is a great idea”. So, I applied for the job thinking I had no chance of getting it and ended up getting hired at the VA. Started out as the person who got the HUD-VASH program up and running. This was in Boise, Idaho. I got the opportunity to actually go to a conference in Washington, DC. Met some VA leadership, including John Kuhn. And John Kuhn said, “Hey, we've got this SSVF program that's starting, you should apply.”

[00:05:28] And I did again, thinking I had no chance of getting the job. But I did end up getting a job as a Regional Coordinator in SSVF. And from there I met Monica Diaz years later. And she offered me a position in her office as the Director of Business Operations. That's a long answer to how I got where I am, [00:05:47] Shawn. You can feel free to edit out as much of that, as you need to.

[00:05:51] **Shawn Liu:** No, we're going to probably keep a lot of that in. And it sounds like you've had a really storied journey throughout a lot of different roles and services. And you [00:06:00] mentioned a lot of acronyms for programs. You mentioned several that I know we're going to get to eventually because these are also the critical housing programs that we use at VA to house Veterans experiencing homelessness.

[00:06:11] You said ones like SSVF, HUD-VASH, HCHV. And we're going to unpack them a little bit later, but I want to circle back to your role in helping to really lead this particular challenge. The Secretary, this past February, outlined this challenge for us in VA: 38,000 Veterans will gain permanent housing by the end of this calendar year.

[00:06:36] What is this challenge and why is this challenge important for us to do now today in 2022?

[00:06:42] **Jill Albanese:** One thing that our Secretary did earlier this year, I think it was actually November of last year. The Secretary visited the medical center in Los Angeles and he took the time to visit an encampment.

[00:06:53] It was a famous encampment, at least in the local area. And this encampment had about 60 [00:07:00] Veterans who were living in tents, living on the street right outside of the VA grounds. When the Secretary visited that encampment, he said, "This has to change. We can't have our Veterans out here in tents."

[00:07:11] And so he charged the Los Angeles VA with getting all of those Veterans off of the street and into permanent housing, or at the very least to get them into transitional housing. And he said, "I want 500 Veterans housed in the Los Angeles area by January." He came up with that very ambitious goal. And again, I think this was in November.

[00:07:31] He said, "I want 500 Veterans housed by January." And we did it! Los Angeles did it! There was a lot of community support, but that actually happened that 500 goal. When the 500 Veterans were housed, the Secretary came to our boss, Shawn. To Monica and said, "Okay, what are you going to do next?" And so, what our office did was they looked at what is ambitious, but also what is achievable?

[00:07:54] So, Monica Diaz looked at how many Veterans did we house last year. And she said, "let's do [00:08:00] better than that." She said, "We're going to take the housing placements that we did in the last year. And we're going to increase that by 5%."

[00:08:07] **Shawn Liu:** Yeah. I remember when Secretary McDonough, prior to his confirmation was actually going through his confirmation hearings in the Senate.

[00:08:14] One of the things that he said during his testimony was that he was going to, "fight like hell for our Veterans". And it does seem as though this challenge is kind of our way of living up to that commitment to fight like hell for our Veterans, especially those who are most vulnerable as well. And it also sounds like though, that this is really important considering when we look at the data and how we've seen a stall in our progress [00:08:36] since 2016. That this

essentially, if I'm understanding correctly, will be a way for us to jumpstart or reinvigorate our commitment to ending Veteran homelessness.

[00:08:46] **Jill Albanese:** 100% agree. And I think the Secretary's commitment to helping homeless Veterans is so admirable. And, you know, his support is so appreciated by our office as well.

[00:08:57] **Shawn Liu:** Yeah, it's a really, really [00:09:00] important thing for our Veterans that this is, once again, a focus for the Administration. I want to ask and circle back now to a lot of the acronyms that you mentioned as you were talking about yourself. Because as I understand it, those are the programs that VA actually uses [00:09:15] to house Veterans who are homeless. So can you talk a little bit about those programs, what those resources are. And as we go along through, I think it's going to be helpful to not only say the acronym, but the title, and then also how you would describe what those programs are and what they do to folks who aren't "in the know" and who maybe come into this for the first [00:09:35] time.

[00:09:35] **Jill Albanese:** Yeah, absolutely. I'll just start if it's okay. I know we won't be able to get to all of these, but just to highlight some of the programs. We have an outreach program and that is our Health Care for Homeless Veterans program. When I first started at VA, it was the program that had been around the longest. This program was really designed to have social workers or case managers who worked at the VA go out, [00:09:58] and meet with [00:10:00] Veterans where they were at. Like they would meet with them on the streets. They would go to homeless shelters. They would talk with Veterans and encourage them to engage with VA medical centers and to get care with VA medical centers. In addition to Health Care for Homeless Veterans, the VA started providing transitional housing. Temporary housing for Veterans who were homeless.

[00:10:21] The VA worked with nonprofit, typically nonprofit, providers in the community to provide designated shelter beds, or even in some cases, housing units. And these were places where Veterans could stay for up to two years to kind of get back on their feet. That was another program and we call that the Grant and Per Diem program because it is a grant funded program. It's more than housing. Grant and Per Diem is [00:10:46] much more than just providing a bed. There are a lot of wraparound services that are provided by the Grant and Per Diem providers. It really is temporary housing plus services to help Veterans get back on their feet. I mentioned HUD-VASH at [00:11:00] the beginning of what I was talking about, my journey to where I am now.

[00:11:03] HUD-VASH stands for Housing and Urban Development, VA Supportive Housing. That is long-term, permanent housing, meaning they need rental assistance to help them pay their rent. And they also need supportive services to help them stay in their housing. The HUD-VASH program was also developed and started by the VA.

[00:11:22] That is a partnership with Housing and Urban Development. HUD actually provides the housing subsidy for the Veteran and VA provides all of the supportive services. It's one of the programs that really helped the decline that you mentioned earlier. After HUD-VASH was started, we also started the program that I worked in. SSVF, as I'd mentioned, that stands for Supportive Services for Veteran Families.

[00:11:46] I would say another game changer in helping get Veterans off the streets and to decrease the numbers of homeless Veterans, SSVF is a rapid rehousing and homeless prevention program. So, rapid [00:12:00] rehousing is a little bit different from transitional Grant Per Diem housing and HUD-VASH. It's really for those Veterans who just need a little bit of help.

[00:12:08] Maybe they became homeless because they couldn't pay the rent. You know, they lost their job and couldn't pay their rent for a couple of months, so they became homeless. SSVF is designed to help those Veterans get back on their feet right away. And these are Veterans who probably don't need that permanent subsidy.

[00:12:25] They don't need the HUD-VASH permanent supportive housing. They just need a little bit of help to get back on their feet. So, SSVF can provide rental assistance for a period of time. And they can also provide case management just to help the Veterans get back on their feet. That program also provides prevention assistance.

[00:12:42] So, if a Veteran is living in their existing housing unit and they get behind on their rent and they're at risk of homelessness, SSVF can actually go in and just pay the landlord and help that Veteran from becoming homeless in the first place. It's an extremely important program for a number of reasons. It can get Veterans off the [00:13:00] street very quickly if they are homeless and it can prevent Veterans from becoming homeless in the first place.

[00:13:05] **Shawn Liu:** Wow, VA has a ton of resources. That was a lot. So, what I heard though, is that we essentially have services for a really full range of the housing instability to homelessness experience. I heard that VA has

resources to prevent Veterans homeless. We have temporary beds, temporary shelter that we can actually temporarily house Veterans in.

[00:13:27] And then these permanent housing resources that can provide essentially rental assistance to really make the rent that a Veteran would go to an apartment that you and I would potentially live at more affordable for them. And a lot of wraparound services as well. And if I understand correctly that these programs, many of them can not only serve the Veterans, but also members of the Veterans families.

[00:13:47] Like you said it right there in the title Supportive Services for Veterans Families. So, some of these can actually provide support for not just the Veteran, but their spouse, kids, other dependents, et cetera, et cetera.

[00:13:57] **Jill Albanese:** Yep. Absolutely. In fact, even [00:14:00] our Grant and Per Diem program has received some additional authority and flexibility to be able to expand and serve not only the Veterans, but also Veteran's dependents.

[00:14:09] **Shawn Liu:** So how do we think about these permanent housing placements? What happens if a Veteran maybe uses two or three of the programs that you mentioned. Is VA going to just triple count them?

[00:14:20] **Jill Albanese:** It's a good question and we get that question a lot. When you look at the continuum of services that we have, that there may be a Veteran that is participating in several different programs.

[00:14:29] You may have a Veteran who is living in Grant and Per Diem transitional housing, who also then goes to HUD-VASH for permanent supportive housing. Although those Veterans would be assisted by both GPD and HUD-VASH, that's only one housing placement. The housing placement only counts once.

[00:14:48] **Shawn Liu:** That makes sense. Each Veteran is being counted once. That every move in is one move in towards the goal. So, it's really about housing 38,000 Veterans and not just each program checking the [00:15:00] box or adding to the tally as somebody moves on from their programs and gets housed. So, a lot of people are probably thinking this is all well and good.

[00:15:06] I glad that VA has all these programs. But how do we help? How can we pitch in to, maybe less so than VA achieves the goal, but more that this

many Veterans and more get the help that they need and have their homelessness ended?

[00:15:20] **Jill Albanese:** Well, I think there are a few ways. First of all, it's just good for the public to be aware [00:15:25] that the VA has so many services and so many ways to help someone who is homeless or at risk of homelessness. So, if you know someone who is a Veteran who is homeless or at risk of homelessness, please help connect them to the VA. We absolutely want those Veterans who are struggling, who are homeless or at risk of homelessness to be connected to our services.

[00:15:48] That's one thing. I think another way is that if you're a landlord, please rent to a Veteran. We need more landlord partners. We are in desperate need, actually, of landlord [00:16:00] partners. So, if you are a landlord or, you know a landlord, or you have a friend who is a landlord, please encourage them to rent to Veterans.

[00:16:07] We need housing units to meet this goal. The same thing if you're an employer or you have a friend or know an employer. Our Veterans need jobs. I mean, those are just some very important ways that the public can help.

[00:16:20] **Shawn Liu:** Fantastic. And for those listening, and we'll go ahead and put links in the description of this episode so that it will be easy for you to identify your nearest VA medical centers so that you can connect either landlords or Veterans in need of services to VA. Jill, this has been fantastic. Before we go, we have a tradition here on this particular show where we end with why. I, myself am not a Veteran. My understanding is you're not a Veteran either. Correct?

[00:16:47] **Jill Albanese:** Right.

[00:16:47] **Shawn Liu:** And so, our Veterans who are listening and they want to know, they want to know who we are and why we're committed to this mission so that this is not just another job for us or that we're not just another faceless bureaucrat.

[00:16:58] But that they can [00:17:00] trust us to carry out the mission and care for them in the way that they both need and deserve. So, as we close out the show for today, what is your "why"? Why are you so committed to achieving these goals?

[00:17:11] **Jill Albanese:** Well, I think if I could share just one more story that I think is very important as far as why I have a lot of passion for this work and really believe in it is that even before I went to, went to college, I did find myself in a situation where, had it not been for my best friend, I would have been homeless.

[00:17:29] I was in a situation where I did not have a place to live, and my best friend brought me into her home. I was lucky enough to have that person as a resource and she actually helped me apply for a housing voucher. And I got it. It was life changing for me because it allowed me to be able to afford rent and it stabilized me and it helped me so much.

[00:17:51] I have seen, and personally experienced, how these kinds of programs can help someone. So, I strongly believe in what we're doing. I [00:18:00] know that it works. If you have stable housing, everything else will fall into place. At least it did for me. I think anybody finds it very satisfying to do work that benefits other people and I certainly feel strongly that our work does.

[00:18:12] **Shawn Liu:** Jill Albanese is the Director of Business Operations for the VHA Homeless Programs Office. Jill, thank you so much for the gift of your time.

[00:18:20] **Jill Albanese:** Thanks, Shawn.

[00:18:21] **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.

[00:18:32] 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's all for this month. We hope that you found this time to be valuable, that you feel empowered in our collective work to ensure that every Veteran has a safe and stable place to call home.

[00:18:57] Take care. [00:19:00]