

EVH - S1EP20 - 2023 Year in Review with Executive Director Monica Diaz

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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 [00:01:00] 24 hours a day, seven days a week. That number again is 877-424-3838

Hey everyone, it's Shawn and it's December. So we are back with our end of the year tradition. With only a few weeks left in 2023, let's take a look back and see what kind of year this was for Veterans. What were Veterans facing? What did we accomplish? And really importantly, what lies ahead as we look toward 2024?

As always, those are all really great questions.

So to help us reflect back on 2023 and get a look at the work ahead, we brought her back, my boss, Monica Diaz.

Ms. Diaz is the executive director for the VHA Homeless Programs Office here in the Department of Veterans Affairs, where she's responsible for formulating, developing and implementing the Department's policies, plans, projects, and interagency initiatives regarding homeless Veterans. And she's also responsible for the development, and management and [00:02:00] execution of the program

office's budget of over \$2 billion, and provides oversight for the integration of operations and ancillary support to over 6,000 homeless service personnel towards the mission of ending Veteran homelessness.

Monica, welcome to the show.

Monica Diaz: Thank you for having me, Shawn. It's just always great to be here with you and just with everybody to talk about this. So thanks for having me.

Shawn Liu: This is great to have you back. So the tradition on our show, having you back on to do the Year-in-Review. And just kind of a delightful little mention I know that you've taken leave with your family, doing a little bit of vacation, and then you texted me one day on your way back saying, "Shawn, I listened to like every episode of the podcast." I'm like, "What? Monica? What do you mean every episode? That was like 20 some odd things."

Monica Diaz: We did. We did. We enjoy it. It's just was very rewarding. Absolutely.

Shawn Liu: That's really gratifying to hear. Okay, let's go ahead and jump right into it.

We got to know you a little bit during last year's December episode on the Year-in-Review. [00:03:00] So I'm gonna kind of link back to that into the description if folks want to check out to get to know a little bit more about your background.

2023. We are recording this on December 4th. It's actually gonna go out on December 11th. We only got a few weeks left of 2023. From your vantage point, what has this year been like?

Monica Diaz: I think this year has been of a lot of work. I will say significant amount of work.

You know, last year we had only one goal. A national goal. And having this year, more than one goal, which was three goals. You know, you have permanent housing placement, you have the returns, preventing Veterans from returning, engaging the unsheltered Veterans.

So there was significant amount of hard work, dedication. This year was a lot of brainstorm for strategy because we really needed to get together among the teams to really think about strategies to overcome different types of barriers, not

only for permanent housing placements, but also again prevent and returns to homelessness, engaging the [00:04:00] unsheltered.

So it has been a year of significant hard work, dedication, strategies and a lot of learning as well.

Shawn Liu: We actually had Jill Albanese on a couple weeks ago to provide us an update. A big focus for us this year has been our 2023 Homelessness Goals. And as you mentioned, we had three goals. That we would house 38,000 more homeless Veterans. That we would prevent those Veterans that we just housed from returning back to homelessness. And in the unfortunate event, if they do, we'd get them back either rehoused or placed back on a path to rehousing. And that we would engage with at least 28,000 unsheltered Veterans. By the time this airs, we won't actually have the November data yet. But we do have the October update and we'll put a link to the press release into the description as well.

But by and large, we've met the goals? And we've met it two months early, like Monica, what gives? How, what, how do we accomplish that?

Monica Diaz: When it comes to the unsheltered engagement of Veterans and also the permanent housing placement, we have met those [00:05:00] goals. Again, it was, I will say learning in the sense, looking back from last year, our goal for permanent housing placement, we met it really much at the end of the year.

But I think we learn. We get better and better. We see what things work, what things don't work. We implemented those lessons learned and we became stronger.

I will say that there were significant areas that we decided to partner together better among our teams, among the community. And that has helped us propel things as well a lot faster, further.

And I think that collaboration was critical this year. We definitely engaged more in those levels of collaboration than I have seen.

Shawn Liu: Let's focus in on that collaboration improvement a little bit. I remember when we started these goals, we were doing a lot of brainstorming when the Secretary saw that we had achieved last year's goals. Last year, we housed 40,401 homeless Veterans exceeding his challenge to us house the original 38,000 homeless Veterans by over 6%. And as we were kind of

brainstorming, "Okay, well what are we gonna [00:06:00] do for this year? What are we gonna do for 2023?" And we started building up the goals. But you had added an extra North Star, if you will, guiding principles. And you called it the One Team Approach. And in many ways, we've been living out the One Team Approach, both from a values and abstract way, but also in some very, very concrete behaviors and things that we did. But before we get into the concreteness, can you tell us a little bit about what is One Team to you? That One Team Approach. And why did you feel it was so important that we implement something like that this year?

Monica Diaz: So this year we developed the initiative of One Team Approach. We actually started talking about it at the end of last year, if I recall, and kind of introducing the concept. But we really became a lot stronger in the messaging this year. We need to provide a One Team Approach and that means really seeing ourselves, believing in our hearts, that we don't work in silos. And we should work as a One Team with our communities among our programs to serve the need of the [00:07:00] Veteran.

And this is the way that we can really move faster, really be agile in our response to whatever the Veteran is needing. Because then we're not alone.

It was such a great reminder about the fact that we definitely cannot do this alone in VA. But also we cannot do this alone just with one program. There's a reason why there's a comprehensive portfolio with programs and services. And those have to really work in such unison, as a One Team, to really be effective. And it just was humbling to see that in action.

Shawn Liu: Yeah, those are really, really great points. And I just want to acknowledge, we actually had a special bonus episode a couple months ago featuring a fireside chat with the leaders from the Greater Los Angeles VA. And how they went ahead and implemented One Team locally throughout Los Angeles. We'll put a link to that into the description as well. It's in your podcast feed, but I'll make it easy for, you can just click on it right then and there.

But it was really interesting hearing them describe One Team and this shift away from thinking [00:08:00] program-centrally, right? Like we have these programs, we have these organizations, we have these resources. And to what degree does a Veteran fit into my program?

And it's shifting in that the One Team Approach that you had championed and that we had started implementing was really shifting more towards Veteran-centric. Of all of the different resources, interventions in a community, what

was the right combination of programs, who are the different organizations that would address this particular Veteran's set of needs? And it's both common sense... I would imagine, like, our partners, our friends, members of the public, like, "Oh, well, Monica, Shawn, duh, like shouldn't that be? Makes sense!" And yet it's kind of revolutionary in a way.

Monica Diaz: Yes. I think the simplest things in healthcare can become very complex. When we started, for example, operationalizing this, one of the actions was the case conferencing at the national level. And when we look at this, I remember rolling out the case conferencing, which was getting all the program managers at the national program office with [00:09:00] all the homeless programs...

Shawn Liu: Yeah, it was a really big smorgasbord, right? Like we had, we had the invite list was massive.

And just to unpack it, so case conferencing for our listeners is this idea where you will have a team of experts, and providers, and counselors, and case managers, and folks with resources get together to problem solve the barriers of individual Veterans, of individual people who are in our care, or in this case for our goals, who have returned to homelessness but are not yet back into our system. That you bring all of those experts and everybody with resources to figure out the specific plans to get specific Veterans back into our system.

Monica Diaz: Correct. So in the past, maybe we will check with the teams at the homeless programs at the field level. "Hey, you know, we have this amount of returns or Veterans that need permanent housing. Tell us what is taking place."

But this time we became part of that team. We gathered everybody in the Homeless Program Office from different programs. Not one program, not two programs. [00:10:00] All the programs. The VISN leaders, the Network Homeless Coordinators that were amazing. And then the homeless program staff at the field level from different programs. And even community providers were in this call to do what exactly you said. As a One Team. Not individual programs, but as a One Team, to really come together and see what can be done? How can we support? How can we eliminate barriers to help that Veteran?

And it was like you say, kind of revolutionary. Even that it was simple. But the reality is that in any healthcare organization, we're so big and so large that we

are not intentional. If we are not purposefully seeking that unity, you can easily go to a model that you work in silos.

I think this really forces to exercise a strong purpose in what we're doing to become that team in a holistic way. And it was extremely intentional and deliberate.

Shawn Liu: Monica, I'm wondering, because you attended every case conferencing session that happened. And that was, that was a lot of meetings. And so I sat in on a handful of them. [00:11:00] And one of the things that stuck out to me as like a revelation or like a really important takeaway or lessons learned was the importance of helping people make the cognitive shift and maybe the values shift about Veterans who return to homelessness or basically getting their second chance, their third chance, their fourth chance. And that there's a shift that needs to happen if we're going to make sure that those Veterans get back to our system of care, because the intuition is, "Oh, well you had your chance. I've got a hundred more Veterans who haven't had their first chance. You just got a chance. You gotta go to the back of the line."

And in many ways, this goal that we had was focused on people shifting to, "No, that person that we just helped is still a priority. Go help 'em again and don't do the natural, commonsensical, intuitive thing to make them go to the back of the end of the line." And that was kind of really, really... That home to me a lot. And I'm wondering, are there other takeaways that you, [00:12:00] because again, you sat in on basically every case conference session from this year, that you took away as things that you know and and spoilers for the rest of the episode are things that might be of focus for us in the coming year?

Monica Diaz: Yes, absolutely. And yes, I attended all the calls. There was like 23 calls every month for an hour each or more, I don't recall the amount.

Shawn Liu: A lot. That's a lot of time. Yeah. That's a lot of, lot of meetings.

Monica Diaz: I know. I'll say it was so rewarding. It was probably the best part of my job to be honest with you. Even with all the work. What I observed in a lot of the calls was one, exactly what you mentioned. When you allow the space to really speak among a diverse team, that comes from different backgrounds, from different programs, from different perspective, different ideas, it really allows us to speak about a lot of the challenges our Veterans, like you mentioned, that were returning to homelessness and allow the space to speak about that with more frankness and with more diversity. And it allow the conversations to what you said, if a Veteran's returning to homelessness,

[00:13:00] maybe the Veteran's struggling at that time, but we are not going to give up. We're gonna try A, B, and C. And if the One Team does not have further ideas, then someone else in the call had another idea, and then another person had another idea. I think the case conferencing, as well, brought the concept of how we collaborate between VISNs and facilities...

Shawn Liu: Oh, and really quickly just to just add because I missed this one. So when we say VISN, Monica and I say VISN, that stands for Veterans Integrated Service Network. It's our jargon for region. So we have like the national level that you and me, Monica, that we work on, the regional level, which we call Veterans Integrated Service Networks or VISNs, and then the local or field level, which is basically VA medical centers and facilities.

Monica Diaz: Absolutely. And I think the case conferencing allowed for those Veterans that are moving a lot from different localities, like you have to really collaborate between the VISNs, the VA medical centers, our office to be aware of that. And I think those case conferences allowed a space as well to engage in a different mindset about how the [00:14:00] teams of those localities work together to help the Veteran and where they are at that moment. So it's just brought that accountability, the responsibility more on a One Team rather than, again, a program or even a locality in itself. So there was a lot of different examples in that way that I think it made us grow, it made us look at things differently and reflect more to make sure that they bring better results.

I am looking forward to looking at the trends more closely. So one of the things that we're doing at the end of this year is looking at the data, but also what took place on those case conferencing, the information that we gathered from our partners, and see what are the main areas that are unnecessary barriers that we need to continue to eliminate. What are the areas that we need to come together more as a team? What are the areas that we need to advocate, that maybe is out of our control, but we need to advocate and we have influence to change that. We have a responsibility there.

So looking first at those trends, my goal is to review that with the team. And then in this year, I [00:15:00] really will like to look at system sustainability improvement. The goals really gave us visibility a lot on many pockets of opportunities. That's what I'm gonna call it. Pockets of opportunities.

And I really wanna get into those pockets of opportunities and create something beautiful. It is important for us to continue to create beauty on those because that's what it's gonna get us to a long-term sustainability system. So utilizing data and information to get us there, it's one of the keys. But I'm looking

forward for next year to really propel the One Team Approach on those pockets of opportunities and continue to create beauty there.

Shawn Liu: Yeah. Fantastic stuff.

Just checking in. We don't have any new goals for next year to unveil today. Sorry if folks were hoping for some breaking announcements. And I think those are essentially still being discussed, planned and negotiated. So we may have some new update in the next coming months. But no breaking news for today it sounds like.

Monica, I also want to kind of acknowledge that, when it came to the increases in challenges or things to overcome this [00:16:00] year? There are a couple big things that hit Veterans. I think one of them, of course, was the end of the Public Health Emergency. The COVID-19 virus has reached endemic levels and the end of the Public Health Emergency removed some flexibilities and authorizations that made things a little bit easier for Veterans to get housed and take care of their health. Now that the Public Health Emergency has ended. And we have a lot of flexibilities that people cared about like increases to the per diem rate for our Grant and Per Diem program, flexibilities under our Supportive Services for Veteran Families program, flexible assistance that was authorized through the Johnny Isakson and David P. Roe Act, the rideshare program was major loss. Are there things that you could say that we are working on in order to make sure that we minimize the negative impact to Veterans, but also advocate for a lot of those flexibilities to stay?

Monica Diaz: I think that's an important question. We definitely benefited from those flexibility during the pandemic. We are looking at it at the office proactively. We recognize that many of those [00:17:00] are not present, but we also recognize that we have a lot of resources. We're looking at it in two ways. One is the advocacy for those, but at the same time, what are we doing now?

The advocacy for those is recognizing that we have a lot of resources within VA. Having a One Team Approach really taps into us coming together more strategically, more cohesively, including with our community partners to really amplify the services for those Veterans.

I think as well we have and continue to have an advocacy role. We collaborate so closely and so well with our congressional stakeholders and we're allowed to provide feedback on those flexibilities and what areas are needed. And we continue to do so. I have to say it has been a great collaboration that we see

continuous progress when it comes to the needs and resources needed for our Veterans.

Shawn Liu: So, what I hear you're saying: this is on your radar, it's something that we're still hitting the pavement for. Hopefully more positive updates in the near future.

Monica Diaz: Absolutely. And again, it is at the forefront. It's part of our strategies, especially when you already know that some flexibilities work. It would be different if we were to think, "Well, I wonder how [00:18:00] will that work?" No, we already know, right? We went through Covid and we knew the good results that that brought, so we definitely have that at the forefront.

Shawn Liu: So, Monica, as we start wrapping up this episode and bringing essentially the year of 2023 to a close, I wanna give you an opportunity to talk to the Veterans directly. We achieved our 2023 goals two months early, but we're not stopping. Like we're not, it's not the end. Like we're not just like picking up and going. We're still gonna be housing homeless Veterans. We're still gonna be focused on preventing them from returning to homelessness. We're still gonna be engaging with unsheltered Veterans because we know, you and I both know how dangerous the experience of unsheltered homelessness is. But as we close out 2023, what do you want Veterans to know about the work from this year and then the work ahead?

Monica Diaz: First is for them to know that we care. I would like our Veterans to know, beyond all the goals and everything that we're doing, we care for you. That's the core of the mission. I can say that wholeheartedly. After meeting with all the different teams across the country for months, numerous calls in our community partners as [00:19:00] well. So that's the first thing I want them to know: we care. We care.

I think the second thing that I would like them to know is that we are here for them, that there's multiple resources, multiple avenues to provide assistance, and that we have the ability to offer hope in a situation that perhaps they feel that could be hopeless.

The other thing that I would like them to know is that not here to judge how they got to that place. We're here to honor that they're Veterans and we are here to honor the fact that they need the help.

We're not here to judge how they got there. That's not our role. We're here to be there for them, believe in them, and not giving up.

Shawn Liu: Monica Diaz is the executive director of the Homeless Programs Office here in the Department of Veterans Affairs.

Monica, thank you so much for the gift of your time.

Monica Diaz: Thank you, Shawn. Gracias, everybody. Take care.

Shawn Liu: If you wanna 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 [00:20:00] 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.

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.