

EVH - S1EP28 - Ending Veteran Homelessness as One Team

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Homelessness is so complex that we need to use an all hands on deck approach. And that has to be coordinated, because if you just say, "Hey, look, everybody needs to go in and tackle this problem, "and you don't do that in a coordinated way," and people don't know what their role is, then you're just going to have chaos.

Shawn Liu: Welcome to Ending Veteran Homelessness, your first hand look into our nation's efforts to ensure that every Veteran has a safe and stable place to call home. From the Department of Veterans Affairs, Homeless Programs Office, I'm your host, Shawn Liu.

If you're a Veteran who's homeless or at risk of homelessness, reach out.

Call the [00:01:00] 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.

So, there's been significant progress towards ending Veteran homelessness.

Since 2010, we've seen a 52% reduction in Veteran homelessness. And this is somewhat unprecedented in the history of our country, especially when you think about other subpopulations of people experiencing homelessness in America, having their rates of homelessness either stagnate, or increase. Veteran homelessness has been decreasing over the last several years.

But it hasn't been an even decrease. If you were to look at a chart, and we'll actually put a chart in the description of this episode so you can see, when you look at the annual Point-in-Time count, the year-over-year estimate to count the number of people experiencing homelessness, including Veterans in [00:02:00] America, you would see, from 2010 to 2016, a significant decline, about a 47% decline in Veteran homelessness.

But then that decline starts to shallow out a little bit. Especially from 2016 to 2020, there's still a decline, but it's only a 6% decline.

In the last couple years, when we actually looked at that, we found it pretty alarming. We were so alarmed by that shallowing of progress we actually gave it a name. We called it "the stall." We said progress towards Veteran homelessness had stalled.

So, when Secretary McDonough joined us at VA, right out of the gate, he gave us several challenges, and a lot of them were focused on permanent housing: getting homeless Veterans, more homeless Veterans, into permanent housing.

In 2022, he challenged us nationally to house 38,000 homeless Veterans, and he challenged us again, another 38,000 homeless Veterans, to get them housed in 2023.

Now, at VA, we have some of the best employees in the country, some of the most dedicated, hard [00:03:00] working folks that you'll ever see in government . And not only did they meet those goals, they exceeded it.

In 2022, we actually housed over 40,000 Veterans. And in 2023, we actually housed over 46,000 Veterans, closer to 47,000. When you think about those two years, 2022 and 2023, VA and our community partners, we actually housed nearly 87,000 homeless Veterans.

This was fantastic and a down payment on the work that we were going to continue to do toward ending Veteran homelessness.

Now, for both of those years, those were essentially ambitious goals that we were actually kind of scared that we weren't going to meet. We didn't have it in the bag. This wasn't like a, like a really, really simple goal.

They were actually pretty ambitious, and for good reason, too.

You've seen wages stagnate across the country for a while. Housing prices skyrocketed. And, of course, we were just emerging from the COVID-19 pandemic. There were a lot of different factors that were [00:04:00] working not only against us as service providers, but the Veterans themselves on their journey from homelessness to housing.

And so there were a lot of things that were important that helped us along the way to achieve both of those goals, not only meet them, but exceeded them.

And one of the main things, because in some instances, we had some additional resources, but in others, we basically had the same resources that we've been having for years. And so, rather than getting an influx of new money, new programs and services, a big part of our success, from what I hear from people in the know, was that we approached the way we delivered services differently, that we worked together as a team better. As One Team.

Now, for folks who are listening in who are Veterans, the concept of our One Team approach, probably sounds so, familiar as to be obvious. It's like, "Yeah, of course, like, if you're gonna do something with a lot of different roles, you gotta do it as one team, right, Shawn?"

Totally. But, you know, if you've been listening on this podcast for the [00:05:00] last two and a half years or so, you know that I'm a civilian.

I don't come from a military background, so that working cohesively as one team, doesn't come natural to me. And in some instances, it didn't necessarily come natural to a lot of our different programs and services. And at VA and in our homeless programs, we have so many different programs and services that work great as programs, but probably had a lot of opportunities to work together and to coordinate better.

And that's where in 2023, we started coming up with our One Team approach, really learning from so many different best practices from the communities that were out there that were doing this work really well, taking the philosophies and the attitudes from military service about working coherently as one team, and really started to apply it into how we delivered programs and services.

And we're carrying that on here in 2024 with our new goal, which is also important because, as you know, we have another goal this year. And this year's fiscal year goal is to house [00:06:00] 41,000 homeless Veterans.

And working together with all of our different programs, all of the different providers as one team is more important now than ever before.

But, I'm getting way ahead of myself. What is One Team precisely? I've used that term a couple times now. What is it? How is it different from how we delivered homeless programs in the past? And how is this going to help us chart a really effective course going forward?

Those are really great questions. So, to help us learn more about how VA is working as One Team to end homelessness among Veterans in America, you

know what I'm gonna say, we've brought her back yet again, Ms. Jill Albanese, Senior Advisor and Director of Clinical Operations here in the Homeless Programs Office.

Let's just jump right into it.

Jill, welcome back to the show.

Jill Albanese: Hey, Shawn, happy to be here.

Shawn Liu: Yeah, great to have you back yet again. And this is one of your brainchilds, one of your babies. I know you've been a caretaker in helping to incubate, I'm going to use a lot of, I'm going to mix so many metaphors right now. Incubate the One Team approach, hatch [00:07:00] it, birth it, get it out into the world. And I think we're starting to see really, really positive impacts based off of its delivery.

Now, you've been on this show so many times now. You are definitely the number one most frequent guest that I have on. So folks are pretty familiar by now about you. So I think we could go ahead and dive on into the topic.

We're going to learn today about our One Team approach. And to start off, I want to level set a little bit because again, for folks who've served in the military, the concept of the One Team that we're gonna talk about is so familiar to them that it's obvious, and I'm sure they probably are looking at us as, "Oh, you sweet, innocent kids. How, how naive you are, right?"

But, for homeless programs, VA homeless programs, and I would even say for other non-VA community-based homeless programs that are serving, other folks, not just Veterans, that the pre-One Team world was pretty fragmented, was pretty siloed, with a lot of [00:08:00] very important providers, nonprofit organizations, charities, programs, and services that worked well providing the services that was their mission to do, but not necessarily working together as a community very well.

From your vantage point, you've actually been in homeless services in a variety of different forms over the course of your career. Does that ring true for you? How were homeless programs delivered in the past prior to a One Team approach?

Jill Albanese: Yeah, no it's what you said is absolutely true.

I think particularly prior to HUD really pushing coordinated entry, we saw a lot of community programs working in silos. To HUD's credit, they said, "Look we really need to have a coordinated approach if we're going to end homelessness." We saw the same thing in VA. We have a lot of really effective and impactful programs that do a great job of providing services to Veterans experiencing homelessness.

And I think that we didn't really realize [00:09:00] as VA that we were working in silos. I know a lot of times when I would talk about needing all hands on deck, One Team approach, folks would look at me like, "What are you talking about? We're already doing that. We're coordinating. We're collaborating. We talk to each other all the time."

But what we found when we really started looking at the data was that we weren't necessarily working as One Team in a way that would be more efficient and have better outcomes for Veterans.

We saw this during the pandemic a little bit. We were all just working as fast as we could to address the COVID crisis and particularly to get Veterans off the street. One of the things that we recognize that if we made a policy shift or a policy change or a decision to do something different in one of our programs, that could have a drastic impact on another one of our homeless programs.

And so we really realized there is a need for us to work as one system, [00:10:00] not a bunch of different programs, but really as one integrated homeless system.

Shawn Liu: Yeah, that makes a lot of sense. And just to kind of reflect on my own history providing services, I actually worked at a homeless coalition before I joined VA and so I have kinda memories of both VA programs but then like the community nonprofits as well. And you mentioned coordinated entry. We're going to put a link to an episode that we did last year on coordinated entry. We're to put a link to that into the description so if folks want to learn more about it, they can check out that episode.

But one of the things that came up during that episode, which is relevant here, is that in the before times, that siloing that you were talking about, what that would often look like would be a lot of different nonprofit organizations, charities, and they would have their own individual missions. Maybe they were focused on hunger, or maybe they were focused on homeless prevention, or maybe they were focused on job training. And, when folks would knock on their door asking for services, [00:11:00] they'd ask the fundamental question,

"Is this person, is this Veteran, a good fit for my program within the limited amount of services that we provide?" And maybe yes, and they would get enrolled and be served, maybe no, and they'd have to go find something else.

And then in many ways, coordination was simply having a giant resource list, where it's like, "Okay, well, if we don't provide clothing for job interviews. Let me check my resource list. Okay, let me, and then, okay, I found this organization. Let me make a referral."

And you can probably imagine just how unbelievably difficult it is to keep a resource list that is completely comprehensive with all of the points of contact up to date for a community. And that is in many ways great for the organization, but it's not a great setup for the actual person trying to get services.

And Jill, you mentioned the idea of, it wasn't as efficient. And I wonder if you could share a little bit more about that observation, especially in the context of the last couple goals, where we had to essentially do more, to serve more Veterans with what we [00:12:00] had. I imagine that there were inefficiencies that, as we started to understand the One Team approach and implement it concretely, that it made different parts of the process more efficient. They could go quicker, more Veterans could get served.

How did things work out for us before a One Team approach? We still got Veterans housed, but I imagine it wasn't as many Veterans as we might have been able to if we were working from the One Team approach from the start.

Jill Albanese: We still got Veterans housed, but it wasn't as efficient as it could be. And one of the things that we saw was that sometimes Veterans would fall back into homelessness needlessly. Sometimes Veterans would be put on a quote, "interest list," when they really didn't need to be.

They could have been housed through other means. So, really what we're doing when we're talking about this One Team approach is that all of our programs are working toward a one shared vision, and that is to end Veteran homelessness. What the One Team approach helps us do is it helps us to leverage the strengths and the [00:13:00] expertise of our various programs. And it helps us to identify strategies that can be more effective and more efficient. It can help Veterans move into permanent housing quickly, decrease the length of time that they stay homeless. It also can help us prevent Veterans from returning to homelessness.

And we saw some pretty drastic improvements in our Veterans returning to homelessness numbers prior to using this kind of One Team approach, about

6% of the Veterans that we housed fell back into homelessness. And we using the One Team approach and really saying, look, let's use all of the resources we have to get those Veterans housed and make sure that if one program is not able to serve the Veteran, let's connect them to another as soon as possible to prevent them from falling back into homelessness or to get them housed quickly.

We saw good results and the data speaks for itself.

Shawn Liu: Yeah, that's fantastic. One of the things that came to mind for me was that this is a truly [00:14:00] Veteran-centric approach. Whereas maybe prior to One Team, you could maybe think of it more as program-centric. That the way we did things, the way we operated were for the health of the program in some ways, where we were centering or prioritizing what was good for the program.

And we'll get more into the details in a moment, but a lot of what I heard made me think that this One Team approach is actually really, really Veteran centric. That in a community, you have a lot of different programs and services, and each of them fits different roles, they're different pieces of a puzzle, they're different parts of the machine. And what we're essentially doing is not trying to make Veterans fit different programs, but wrap different programs and services around individual Veterans based off what they need in any given moment, which kind of actually gets me a little bit excited.

Where did, where did this idea come from? I imagine that this is not something that just came ex Nilo from whole cloth, but that it was probably standing on the shoulders of giants, kind of yes and-ing a lot of other concepts from the past.

So where did the one Team approach that we're [00:15:00] using today, where'd it come from?

Jill Albanese: Oh, that's a great question. What I can tell you is that when I started reviewing the draft of our Homeless Program Office Strategic Plan, and this was years and years ago. And just looking at all the various strategies that we had identified as things that we needed to do to close the gaps.

When you see those kinds of things in writing, you can very clearly see that we needed to work as a system and that there were strategies that really required more than one program to be efficient.

For example, there were some big challenges, some big tasks that we needed to solve. Unsheltered homelessness is one of those, right? That is a very complex

problem that requires not only expertise, but also cooperation and collaboration from various programs that we have. We wouldn't say, "Hey, that's just the problem of an outreach worker, right?"

We need to have outreach workers working toward doing outreach and finding Veterans who are [00:16:00] unsheltered. We also need the collaboration and cooperation of our interim transitional housing programs or our short term interim housing programs. We also need somebody that's going to help that Veteran move into permanent housing.

So just looking at, again the big, large problems that we had that we needed to tackle as part of our strategic planning, it really was evident that this was going to require an all hands on deck, One Team approach. And that we could not say, "That issue we're going to delegate to our outreach staff, or that issue we're going to delegate to rapid re housing program." Homelessness is so complex that we need to use an all hands on deck approach.

And that has to be coordinated, because if you just say, "Hey, look, everybody needs to go in and tackle this problem," and you don't do that in a coordinated way, and people don't know what their role is, then you're just going to have chaos.

When you're working in your own program you're really focused on your own program and what your own program can do. And we need to think [00:17:00] beyond that.

And again, we really have to think of ourselves as one system. It is a culture shift, and it's also going to require all of us to know a little bit more about what's available, what resources are available. And the reason for that is because sometimes a Veteran would get referred to one program and the Veteran would be screened and found, "Oh you're not really eligible for this program or you're not appropriate for this program. You'll have to figure something else out."

We don't want that. If a Veteran is screened for one program and that program either doesn't have capacity or it's not the appropriate program, we then need to say, "Okay what can we do? Who else can help this Veteran? Does this Veteran need assistance from another program? Do I need to call in somebody else?" Like, this is one of the benefits of having this One Team approach. You use all the resources that are available to help that Veteran.

We don't just stop and say, "Oh, we're out of vouchers so the Veteran's going to have to go on an interest list." No, we look at what do we have available to help

this Veteran get housed and [00:18:00] we do everything we can to get that Veteran housed.

There's more to it than just saying all the programs are going to be integrated and, are going to tackle these complex problems as a team. This takes a tremendous amount of coordination, collaboration, meeting, talking through, doing old fashioned case conferencing making sure you've got a by-name list that's accurate and updated. There is a lot to this.

It sounds easy and it sounds like common sense, but this is a shift and it's going to take a lot of work. And I'm really proud of the work that some of the communities are doing to really implement a One Team approach to improve their system and to provide better services and better outcomes to Veterans.

Shawn Liu: Yeah, yeah. Really well said. Also, you mentioned our strategic plan a couple of times. We're going to put a link to the strategic plan into the description of this episode. So folks can check that out too. That is publicly available.

Jill, this has been fantastic. I want to shift gears now and talk a little bit about how this looks concretely in the real world.

[00:19:00] You've mentioned a couple different activities that sprung forth from the One Team approach. And actually, even in last year's, the 2023 Homelessness Goals, we had a lot of what we call case conferencing sessions focused on Veterans who are returning to homelessness.

Case conferencing is basically a special meeting that is a problem solving meeting. It's focused on individual Veterans. The meeting is attended by different service providers, whether they be for permanent housing, or emergency shelter, or outreach. And they're basically problem solving how to either keep Veterans from falling back into homelessness, or more relevantly for what we're talking about here, when a Veteran did return to homeless, how do we get them back into our system of care and on that path to permanent housing again. And it was a really, really concrete meeting, problem solving meeting, very action oriented to figure out the solutions for individual Veterans and then go do the solutions. And that was a really, really great example that I remember that we've talked about a couple times on this podcast about the One Team approach.

Are there other activities that are [00:20:00] concrete that can help visualize how the One Team approach is lived out on a day to day basis?

Jill Albanese: What we're talking about doing is improving outcomes for Veterans. We want to increase the number of Veterans that are exiting to permanent housing. One of the things we still see is that we may be at capacity with our HUD-VASH vouchers. And maybe that's because we don't have enough case managers at the VA Medical Center or maybe that's because there is some sort of backlog with the public housing agency partner. But, when we see a delay like that we don't want to say, "Okay, let's just make the Veteran wait because we don't have a case manager available," or, "Let's make the Veteran wait because we think that the public housing agency isn't going to be able to get the Veteran a voucher." We don't want to do that.

We want to use the strengths of all of our programs and see where do we have capacity. Do we have a case manager in another program, for example, that can help get that Veteran housed? Do we have other resources such as rapid rehousing that can get the Veteran housed while they're waiting for the voucher?

We don't want [00:21:00] Veterans to wait needlessly. We want to make sure that we're using all available resources to get those Veterans housed.

I think the other thing, too, is just talking about the unsheltered situation again and reducing the duration of time that a Veteran would remain homeless. There are just so many examples of where, if we use this all hands on deck, One Team approach, we can solve very complex issues.

Encampment resolution is another one. Whereas one program alone, it would be so hard to solve a problem or to resolve an encampment and make sure that everybody is moving from unsheltered homelessness into permanent housing.

Really, so many things take an all hands on deck, One Team approach, and we really want to encourage all of our medical centers to use this as much as they possibly can.

Shawn Liu: Jill, as you were describing that, I was listening in and I heard two other key, maybe like components that communities need to really live out the One Team approach. The first one was essentially like a shared goal or aim.

Throughout today's [00:22:00] episode, we've described two or three of them in terms of goals that would unite a group of disparate programs and services, whether it's moving Veterans into permanent housing, preventing them from returning to homelessness or re engaging them if they return to homelessness. And then you just brought up engagement of unsheltered Veterans. All three of those were actually our goals from 2023 and have carried over to 2024. But it

sounds like having that really, really high level goal that can unify and help direct the different actions of different people, different stakeholders, different organizations, different programs towards that goal is a critical component.

And then the second thing that I heard, and maybe if you could just share a little bit more about that, is I guess the importance of like a leadership team, a group of stakeholders that have the power to direct their own resources in service of that goal. Does that make sense? Am I hitting the right notes right now?

Okay.

Jill Albanese: It makes a lot of sense. I think, too, just to back up a bit, I think right now we are in this really [00:23:00] unprecedented time where there are so many challenges with the housing market, the rising rental costs that just continue to go higher and higher, the declining vacancy rates, more folks are staying in the rental market, we're seeing the availability of affordable rental units continues to decrease as more and more people are staying in that rental market.

So, these kind of market factors really do impact our ability to get Veterans housed. So, we just absolutely have to use all of our resources that we have and work in a coordinated way.

This takes a lot of work to implement and one of the things that we have done is we've released a One Team Toolkit, which Shawn you helped put together for us.

That's been released. It talks about the various different things that you really need to have in place to be able to implement this One Team approach. And one of those is having a leadership team to guide this work at the local level. It's one thing to have resources and have the different types of services available, but you really have to have a leadership [00:24:00] team to make sure that the work is getting done.

And so in our One Team Toolkit, if I can put a little plug in for that, we do talk about what does a leadership team need to look like, who should be part of it, what's the purpose, how does a leadership team need to work to help move this One Team approach forward. And there are lots of other good tools and suggestions for how to implement a One Team approach at the local level.

Shawn Liu: Excellent. We're going to put a link to that One Team Toolkit in the description so folks can check it out.

A bit of a trigger warning, it is very technical. The audience for that is homeless Service providers. However, if you're a Veteran and you're interested in checking it out, too, you want to know what we're up to, feel free. It's publicly available. I encourage you to check it out. I just want to give you that warning. It is admittedly technical and filled with a lot of jargon.

Jill, this has been fantastic. Before we let you go, can you let us know where you're headed with the One Team approach? What's next on the horizon? I hope, because this has actually gotten me very, very excited, today's episode, that this is not just a one and done.

It's not just a fad that once we get past [00:25:00] 2024, we're just going to be on to the next thing. I hope that One Team sticks around. Where are you headed with implementing the one team approach?

Jill Albanese: I see this as a new way of us doing business. We want to continue to refine the One Team approach. We want this to get better. We want this One Team approach to spread across all communities. And again, this is really the way we want to do business. Really looking at how are we performing as a system versus how are we performing as individual programs.

it is going to help more Veterans. It's going to have better outcomes for Veterans.

Shawn Liu: Jill Albanese is the Director of Clinical Operations here in the Homeless Programs Office.

Jill, my friend, as always, thank you so much for the gift of your time.

Jill Albanese: Thanks, Shawn.

Shawn Liu: If you want to know more about the services that VA provides to Veterans experiencing homelessness and housing instability, visit us online at www.va.gov/homeless. And if you're a Veteran who's homeless or

at risk of [00:26:00] 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're enjoying the show, leave us a review on Apple Podcasts. 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.

[00:27:00]