

# Ending Veteran Homelessness: S1EP3: All About Outreach - Meeting Veterans Where They (Literally) Are

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[00:00:34] **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,

[00:00:46] 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 8 7 7 4 2 4 3 8 3 8. Trained counselors are [00:01:00] standing by to help, 24 hours a day, seven days a week. That number again is 8 7 7 4 2 4 3 8 3 8.

[00:01:13] Picture this: it's way early in the morning. The sun just started to peak out over the horizon. You're driving in your car, or riding on your bicycle, or walking down your street. As you're starting your day, you notice that to the side of the road, there's a person. Likely a man, but maybe a woman and they're holding a cardboard sign that reads, "homeless Veteran, anything helps, God bless. A lot of thoughts and feelings might be running through your head and heart. Are they legit? Should I give them money? Should I give them food? And regardless of whatever you personally decide to do, you can't help, but feel like somebody should do something more to help. And as you continue about your day, and as your mind continues to wander, [00:02:00] more questions keep coming up.

[00:02:01] What help is out there? How do folks who are on the street even know how to get that help? If you've ever wondered any of these questions, or if you're a Veteran who's actually in this very situation, fear not. Because on today's episode, we have some answers. And to help us learn more about how VA reaches out to Veterans experiencing homelessness, I can think of no one better to talk to than our very own Eileen Devine.

[00:02:25] Ms. Devine is the National Director for Healthcare for Homeless Veterans in the VHA Homeless Programs Office. She's also a licensed clinical social worker who's worked in a variety of VA settings including outpatient, mental health, inpatient medicine, homeless programs, and in programs specifically for Veterans experiencing severe and persistent mental illness. In addition to providing direct clinical care and supervision for multiple VA medical center teams over the last 20 years, she's also worked at the regional level with the Veterans Health Administration as the Network Homeless Coordinator for the Pacific Northwest and at the national level as the National Program Manager for [00:03:00] Community Resource and Referral Centers.

[00:03:01] Eileen welcome to the show.

[00:03:03] **Eileen Devine:** Thanks so much for having me.

[00:03:04] **Shawn Liu:** Yeah. Great to have you here. So tell us a little bit about yourself. How did you get into the VA and what is your role like today as the Director for Healthcare for Homeless Veterans?

[00:03:13] **Eileen Devine:** So I started in the VA right in graduate school. So the second year of my Master's in Social Work Program at Portland State.

[00:03:21] I was lucky enough to get one of the coveted spots at the practicum for the Portland VA Medical Center. So started there and loved it so much that I applied for a position right after graduation and was lucky enough to get my foot in the door. And fast forward about 20 years and here I am still loving working in the system, working with Veterans and, and doing this type of work

[00:03:45] **Shawn Liu:** 20 years is a pretty epic career. And like many other social workers, got their start as an intern going through their graduate program and then becoming staff. And I know that's a similar story for so many of the [00:04:00] staff that worked with our Veterans on a day-to-day basis. So you're the National Director for Healthcare for Homeless Veterans. And my understanding is that Healthcare for Homeless Veterans, or HCHV, really focuses on both providing outreach and some other residential treatment

services. Can you talk a little bit about what outreach is as a concept and how that is carried out through Healthcare for Homeless Veterans?

[00:04:23] **Eileen Devine:** Yeah, absolutely. And you mentioned our program and obviously there's a continuum of programs within our larger Homeless Program Office. And one of the things that I thought I just mentioned about HCHV specifically, because some of your listeners might have heard of HCHV programs at the local level and it could get confusing, like, is that the whole homeless program at VA? Is it a portion of it? And the reason for that confusion is that HCHV was actually the first homeless program and the only homeless program in VA. When it was decided that VA would start providing homeless services, it was really focused on homeless outreach. And that was primarily what [00:05:00] these few social workers at every medical center would do.

[00:05:02] And that was called the HCHV program. And of course over the last many years, probably 30 years, we've expanded as an office into HUD-VASH and Grant and Per Diem and that sort of thing, but some of the medical centers have kept that HCHV as the name for their entire program at their local medical center. So just a little history there.

[00:05:23] HCHV today, what we focus on is primarily outreach. That is the backbone of our program. That is our primary mission. And we, just like the Homeless Program Office as a whole, have expanded in terms of our mission. Expanded into stand downs, which I'm sure many of the listeners are very familiar with. We support stand downs on the VA side through our office. We also have Community Resource and Referral Centers. There's 32 of those strategically placed in cities that have high numbers of homeless Veterans. It's what you would think of as like a one-stop shop for homeless Veterans to receive all kinds of services in the same location. [00:06:00] We have our Contracted Residential Services program. And that's a program where we are able to contract with local community partners who are providing emergency shelter and services to homeless Veterans and other adult, homeless adult individuals in the community already. We're able to contract with them and reserve a certain number of those beds for homeless Veterans specifically.

[00:06:22] And then we also head up the coordinated entry efforts in our office. Coordinated entry really comes down to working with community partners, working with them very closely to coordinate services so we're not duplicating services. We're making the most of our resources and energy and time in each given community.

[00:06:40] So we have a lot of moving pieces that we work with. But as I said before, HCHV, our mission is and always has been focused on outreach first and foremost.

[00:06:50] **Shawn Liu:** That sounds really comprehensive. There's a lot of fantastic activities going on there, and I really appreciate you taking us back in time. HCHV [00:07:00] actually in its early stages, started back in the eighties, which is a significant amount of time in the past.

[00:07:06] But I also appreciate for context, though, this essential journey that, over the years, from pure outreach to adding on different other services, residential services. I think we've seen kind of like a permanent housing Renaissance since maybe, want to say, 2008, 2010. And then really building out to the services that we have today.

[00:07:29] You brought up coordinated entry, which I think is an interesting component here to talk about in terms of outreach to Veterans experiencing homelessness. Specifically, because I'm sure many of our listeners, if they are familiar with services in their own towns, they're probably familiar with nonprofits or missions or church groups or other groups, different organizations that do their particular services.

[00:07:54] They may feed the community. They may do what we consider street outreach. And I want to touch on that a little bit later [00:08:00] as well. But it's done so in this, "this is my agency, this is my program, this is my organization" kind of way. But coordinated entry takes a different perspective on that. Can you talk a little bit about how that concept really helps make a community's homelessness response better?

[00:08:15] **Eileen Devine:** Yeah, absolutely.

[00:08:16] I think as programs have evolved over time in the community and in VA, I think as our understanding of what the experience is really like for homeless individuals and what is really preventing them from finding secure and permanent and safe housing, we have also realized through that process that if we work together, we're going to be able to accomplish more.

[00:08:40] So looking at communities and coming to the table, having all of the partners that you've talked about, they all serve a valuable purpose in that community. They all have unique resources. Perspective services that they provide coming to the table and saying, what can you do to help this homeless Veteran versus what I can [00:09:00] do and how can we work together?

[00:09:01] So we're not working at odds, but also duplicating services. I think over time, we've just realized... And I say "we" as a collective, not just VA, but as collective communities have realized, it just makes so much sense to do that. Now it sounds great in theory. And I doubt that many would disagree with what I've just stated. But when we're really talking about merging large agencies, programs, systems, and the way they've always operated, the way they've really welcomed individuals into their systems or their agencies, their admission criteria, and coming to common understandings about all of that, it gets quite complicated.

[00:09:36] And so I'm really proud of the work that the medical centers have done, because it really does take staying at the table working through bottlenecks, working through obstacles, working through stuck points, finding middle ground when agencies or communities are in disagreement about different aspects, and keeping their eye and their goal and their purpose in mind, which is to help these homeless Veterans [00:10:00] and place the burden of navigating the community resources and the community, social service systems on the provider versus placing it on the individual, the homeless Veteran who needs assistance. It's complex. It takes a lot of energy. It takes a lot of resources. And anyone experiencing homelessness, we can assume that they're not in a great position to do that.

[00:10:21] And it shouldn't be their responsibility either. We should be taking that on for them and making it easy for them to navigate.

[00:10:27] **Shawn Liu:** That's a really great point. And I'm glad you mentioned that because there are times on this particular show and other times where we go out into the community and talk about homeless services, that we can get so in the weeds. We can get so technical. The content kind of glazes over our listeners' heads. And I really appreciate you bringing a really practical benefit and value, especially for any of the Veterans who are listening today, about how they would benefit from a system like coordinated entry and why that as a concept is so important. Our systems are very [00:11:00] complex and complicated to navigate. The onus should be on us to make that system process easier, not on the participant or the Veteran really trying to find services. And so that the responsibility, what I heard you say, is on us to figure out that, of the full range of all of the services that are present in a community, regardless of the agency, regardless of the organization, that it's on us as providers and as the homeless service system to figure out what is the right combination of services to help any specific Veteran get help. I think that's just a fantastic point that.

[00:11:33] I want to shift gears a little bit and circle back to this concept of outreach and talk about how VA goes out into the community to help find Veterans experiencing homelessness or housing instability, and get them connected to resources.

[00:11:46] Especially for those like the scenario we talked about at the intro where it might be a person experiencing unsheltered, street homelessness. They're out on the streets. They're out in the woods. They're out in encampments. Sometimes, may [00:12:00] not necessarily know the best way to connect to us. So as you mentioned, it's on us to reach out to them.

[00:12:05] Can you talk a little bit about how that happens across the country? What different things VA staff do to make sure that Veterans know the resources are available and know how to get to us for help.

[00:12:15] **Eileen Devine:** Yeah. Yeah. There's all kinds of different ways, very creative ways that happen. Our outreach workers, we have two primary disciplines with our outreach staff at medical centers. Primarily social workers, who of course have clinical background. And then we also have peer support specialists. And, obviously, both bring very unique experiences and knowledge to those roles. And I think are both equally important. The reason why I mentioned social workers having the clinical background is because we look at outreach to homeless Veterans who are living on the street as taking clinical expertise.

[00:12:47] It is about going out, finding Veterans who either don't know they're eligible for services, they don't know how to access the services or, in some cases, have been very reluctant to come to the VA medical center and [00:13:00] receive services. And so that engagement process can take months to build relationships. To really build trust so that Veteran knows we do have their best interests in mind. We really do want to help them find a place where they feel comfortable and secure and safe. It can involve providing them with items that they might need in their time living on the streets. So sleeping bags, warmer clothes, socks, toiletry items, that sort of thing. But it certainly goes beyond that.

[00:13:26] To do this clinical work and relationship building, the peer support specialists, obviously by the title, Veterans who some of them have lived on the streets have experienced homelessness in their past. So they have another unique skillset and experiences that they can bring. Also very valuable, very important.



[00:13:42] They understand what it's like to be in that Veteran's position. They have a different kind of rapport and relationship they can build. And so having these staff go into encampments, literally anywhere that a homeless Veteran is residing on the street. They oftentimes will go to community based organizations where maybe [00:14:00] those folks who are experiencing literal street homelessness go to, for example, get a meal so that they can engage with them.

[00:14:06] We always talk about the outreach staff - they have to be outside the medical center walls. They need to be in the community most of the time, because that is really where they are going to find the Veterans that they were hired to engage with and to meet and to serve.

[00:14:21] **Shawn Liu:** You've mentioned a lot of really strong practices in engagement. You said a lot of things like building trust, developing a relationship, building rapport. These all sound like very time consuming activities. Whenever I talk to friends about the work, you probably run into the same conversations with your friends when you talk about what you do as National Director, and you probably get this similar question over and over and over again.

[00:14:46] "Don't these Veterans want to be homeless? Isn't homelessness, a choice at the end of the day?" And what you've just described are a lot of efforts that VA staff do to really develop relationships and build trust. What do you say in those [00:15:00] situations to somebody who asks you, "Isn't homelessness a choice? Don't people want to be homeless?"

[00:15:03] **Eileen Devine:** Yeah. I understand the need to want to take really complex social issues that are multifaceted and intersect with so many parts of our society and our communities, to simplify those and say, "Well, it must just be about the about the person's choice". Because then it's not, the burden, again is not on the system or the people living in that community or the businesses there and all of the community coming together to solve this problem.

[00:15:30] It's on that one individual person, if they wanted housing, couldn't they get it. So this must be a choice. So I completely understand our human need to simplify it in that way. But the reality is that it is a complex issue. I don't believe that any one person in our society would choose to be homeless.

[00:15:46] It is an awful way to live. There is nothing luxurious, pleasant, humane about it. So why would someone choose that? Now the next question in my mind is, "Well, why are they in this position then?" And [00:16:00] it's

going to look different for every individual who is living on the streets. But for some of our homeless Veterans, what we find over that period of time of getting to know them, over that period of time of building trust and really engaging with them, is that there are all different kinds of complex, verifiable, very good reasons why they are in the situation that they're in. And those don't get resolved overnight.

[00:16:24] You can put somebody in housing overnight that possibly could happen. And that is wonderful. And that's what we are always striving for. That's along the lines of the Housing First process, but in Housing First, we also recognize that housing is just one small piece of them resolving their homelessness. So they get into housing. Maybe they are then able to relax a little bit, have dry socks, not be in survival mode as much as they were before.

[00:16:49] That takes time for them to come out of that traumatic experience and heal from that. And then start to really take a look at all the different reasons why they may [00:17:00] have been experiencing homelessness, especially for long periods of time.

[00:17:03] So what is the trauma history like? What mental health issues have been unresolved? What kind of relationships do they really need support and helping repair so that they have a community around them? How do they integrate back into society and have meaningful work, become a meaningful part of their community? Those are just a few of the small pieces that make up this really big, socially complex and personally complex issue.

[00:17:26] So that question of, "Well, don't they want to be homeless?" It really is trying to simplify what is such a complex, multifaceted, layered issue that simply can't be broken down into a yes or no, they choose it or not.

[00:17:41] **Shawn Liu:** Yeah, that is so insightful. And you said some amazing things there. You touched on just how traumatizing the experience of homelessness can be. The real importance of providing humane services. I'm glad you also touched on Housing First and provided a little bit of an explainer on that. On this particular show, we strive to [00:18:00] demystify some of the jargon terms that we use so I'm glad that you touched on it there. You described so much about essentially honoring the histories and the circumstances that could contribute to a Veteran experiencing homelessness.

[00:18:13] And wrapped in so much of what you just said about the outreach process, where these themes of humanity, dignity, respect for the person. I'm wondering if you just share a little bit more about why those concepts are



important to you, both as a national leader and as another fellow colleague here at VA. Why are those themes so important for this specific subpopulation of Veterans?

[00:18:36] **Eileen Devine:** There's actually a book that was written not too long ago. And it was called, *What Happened to You?* And the whole premise of the book was looking at individuals who have not ended up where we would expect the majority of society to end up. They're on the fringes of society. Maybe they've been in systems like the criminal justice system or experiencing homelessness or parts of society that they may be [00:19:00] judged for.

[00:19:00] Again, "They must choose that. They're just bad people. They don't work hard enough". Whatever it might be. And so the premise of this book is instead of saying, "Why aren't you doing better? Why aren't you working harder?" It's asking the question, "What happened to you? What happened to you that this might be now where you are in life, that you might be experiencing such trauma and such hard things?"

[00:19:20] And so, just as a person, I think that that's important to look at other people through that lens, but especially people who are experiencing homelessness, as we're talking about today. For one person, it's going to be maybe about mental health issues that have gone unaddressed or substance use issues they haven't received support. For others, it honestly might be about, I lost my housing, I'm on the street, I have my dog, or I have my cat, and I can't possibly part with them. And the only way to be with them is to live on the street.

[00:19:47] And so again, I think that the medical center staff, if we have homeless staff listening to this, they're going to say, "Yep." Cause that's what they do every day. They work with these individuals, these homeless Veterans and say, "What is it for you?" For this [00:20:00] individual sitting in front of me? What is your story? What has happened to you? And then working from there, meeting the Veteran where they're at and not trying to put them into some cookie cutter program or protocol or system that really doesn't look at them like an individual.

[00:20:15] **Shawn Liu:** Yeah. So well said. So much good stuff there. I want to shift gears one more time. Want to talk about how the public can help? I'm sure many folks who are listening in are still probably wondering of some of those foundational questions. If I see somebody on the street, should I give them money? Should I give them food? What should I do to help?

[00:20:33] And while the money and food question is likely going to be an individual decision for each person in those circumstances, I wanted to get your take on what are some of the best ways that members of the public can help not only individual Veterans experiencing homelessness, but our nationwide effort to end Veteran homelessness.

[00:20:52] **Eileen Devine:** Great question. And if you've wrestled with that question of like, "Ah, I see this person at the exit ramp of the freeway that I take [00:21:00] every day, and they're holding the sign. And every day, I think, should I give them money or shouldn't I, what are they going to do with the money? Is it a good idea or not? Is this really going to help them?"

[00:21:07] If you've struggled and wrestled with that question, then I would encourage you to begin looking at your own community and the agencies that serve homeless individuals. And just picking up the phone and calling them and asking them what are some ways that I can help? What is the best use of my time? What are the best uses of my other resources, whether it be other connections that you might have in your community or financial contributions that you feel like you're able to make? And they can tell you exactly what's going on in that community, where they need people, where they need resources. And then you can begin there.

[00:21:40] And then the other piece of that is that, when you see a homeless individual and they need some services, then you feel informed. If you want to be able to point folks in the right direction for resources, you actually know what's going on in that particular community.

[00:21:53] **Shawn Liu:** That's really great concrete advice. And what I imagine would be another fantastic way to carry out your suggestion [00:22:00] is, especially if those who are listening in don't know who their organizations are, a quick Google search of your community's name, maybe your city, your county, and homeless coalition or homeless services is probably a fantastic way to actually just find out.

[00:22:13] Eileen before we go, we'd like to close out each of our shows with our guests talking about their "why". Many of the Veterans that I've worked with in the past, they know that I personally, I'm not a Veteran. But they felt comfortable working with me because they knew where my heart was, where my calling was, that I mission-driven, that I'm focused here.

[00:22:32] And I always think that it's a great idea to close out each of these shows with our guests talking about their "why." So as my last question for you,

I want to know what is your "why?" Why do you serve Veterans and specifically Veterans experiencing homelessness? What drives you for this particular work?

[00:22:47] **Eileen Devine:** Yeah, it's such a great question. You know, I am a clinical social worker. Much of my day-to-day job is administrative, policy focused, which I also love. And all [00:23:00] of that, of course, to support the clinical folks, doing the really hard work day-to-day in the field. And so I absolutely love that role, but I think what got me into social work still remains my "why" and the reason why I feel like this work is so important. I really do believe in the dignity of each, individual person. And I also believe that we have a collective responsibility, just as other humans living on this planet together, to do what we can to use our privilege, use our power, use our resources, use the gifts that we've cultivated and grown over our lifetime, to make things easier for the collective whole. And so homelessness is actually a great example of how that really plays out in quote unquote, real life. It is not an issue that can be solved by one person. It just can't, it's too complex. There's too many powers at play. There's too many factors involved. And so if we can all kind of take a step back and say, "Well, what's my piece of [00:24:00] that?" And then we can do our best to use again, our privilege, our power, our resources, the gifts that we have to just continue to work towards solutions. To help that one person who is so worthy of that, then I think our world would be a pretty great place.

[00:24:17] So that's, that's my why.

[00:24:19] **Shawn Liu:** Eileen Devine is the National Director for Healthcare for Homeless Veterans in the VHA Homeless Programs Office. Eileen, my dear friend and colleague, thank you so much for the gift of your time.

[00:24:28] **Eileen Devine:** Thanks, Shawn. It was great. Thanks for having me.

[00:24:30] **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](http://www.va.gov/homeless). 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 [00:25:00] valuable, that you feel empowered in our collective work to ensure that every Veteran has a safe and stable place to call home.

[00:25:06] Take care.