

EVH - S1EP30 - A Closer Look at VA Homeless Programs FY 2025 Budget

Steven Tillman: [00:00:00] When I talk to people who maybe are not in the VA system or do not know enough about the Homeless Program Office, they will see that there's homeless program social workers, maybe there's people that are locally working towards whatever program that they're assigned to. But they're sometimes surprised to hear they're money going toward grantee that partners, contractor partners, working directly with our community agencies to provide direct services to Veterans.

So it's really not about admin, it's really not necessarily about more VA staff. There's a lot of money and energy and attention going towards those partnerships. And I think that's something that is not well talked about.

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 [00:01:00] 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.

As the Director of Communications here in the Homeless Programs Office, it's important for me to stay informed on how public conversations about homelessness, including Veteran homelessness, are going. Each month, I get a report on evolving trends that are taking place on social media. It's actually really insightful stuff.

Every few months, though, the report reveals a spike in the number of people talking about homeless Veterans. Something somebody posted somewhere went viral and got a lot of attention.

Now, I'd love to think that the spikes are due to people hearing about the great work that our dedicated staff are doing each and every day to permanently house Veterans. But frustratingly, that's not the case.

No, when there's a spike, it's usually [00:02:00] because some other current event happened that resulted in the government, the US government, spending a lot of money, usually in the capital B billions of dollars, and then folks are wondering if that money isn't better spent taking care of homeless Veterans.

Now, when I saw the spike the first one or two times, I actually didn't pay too much attention to it.

I shrugged it off as something that just happens on the internet. Viral stuff happens all the time. But when the spikes kept happening, over and over again, about the same conversation, the same topic of where does the money go, why aren't we spending more on Veteran homelessness, I realized I had to do something about it.

I'm the Director of Communications, after all, so I can't fault the public for not knowing about the billions of dollars allocated to Veteran homelessness if I don't tell them about it.

In the last couple months, I got with our finance team and developed what I hope is a helpful article explaining how much money is allocated to VA for Veteran homelessness and how that money is being spent.

And for this month's episode, we're going to talk about it. We're going to talk about the budget, [00:03:00] how big it is, where the money goes, and most importantly, what the impact is.

But before we talk about the budget, I have one last problem to address. This is, of course, an interview-based show, and now through this development of this article, I've become the subject matter expert for publicly talking about our budget. But it's my show, and I can't interview myself.

So, I'm excited to hand over the interview reins this month to my dear friend, Steven Tillman. He's the National Director for the Healthcare for Homeless Veterans Program here in the Homeless Programs Office. In a wild experiment this month, he's actually going to interview me. Let's see how we do. Steven, welcome to the show.

Steven Tillman: Thank you so much, Shawn. I am really excited to be here today. I'm a long time listener, first time...

Shawn Liu: First, long time listener, first time host.

Steven Tillman: Absolutely. So, I appreciate this opportunity. I'm looking forward to our discussion.

Shawn Liu: Also, just a peek behind the curtain, I know you and I have been joking a little bit about the show's development over the years and we're like, "When are we gonna tell your why? When are you gonna get interviewed?" I'm like, "Oh, that's an interesting question."

We [00:04:00] tabled it for a little bit, but now with this little problem of I can't interview myself, I was like, "Steven, do you want to give it a go?"

And gracefully, you said yes, so I really appreciate you pinch hitting for me today while I'm here to be interviewed.

So before I officially hand over the reins to you, love to get to know you a little better. This is actually the first time that you've been on the show.

I know we've had your predecessor, Eileen Devine, on a couple times. We also have your current deputy, Alison Bond, on a couple times as well, but this is your first time, and you're actually somewhat new, you've actually been with us for a bit, but you're new to the role of National Director for Healthcare for Homeless Veterans, so tell us a little bit about yourself and that journey.

Steven Tillman: Yeah, absolutely, Shawn. Again, my name is Steven Tillman. I'm the National Director for Healthcare for Homeless Veterans. I've actually been in the VA for 15... This will be 15 years this month, and all within the homeless programs. Whether it was working on the front lines as a HUD-VASH case manager, whether it was working with the courts and the jail systems as a Justice Outreach Specialist, it's always been within this [00:05:00] space.

And early on in my career, I developed a passion for wanting to go deeper and understand where are the systemic issues that affect our Veterans most.

I had moved on into a supervisory role, moved on into a regional coordinator role.

The one thing that is very apparent to me is that each Veteran has a unique story and having the opportunity to work with Veterans, hear their story, help them walk their journey and develop a life worth living that's true to them, not based on what I want them to do, not based on what society tells them to do, but rather what is true to them in their journey.

And I find it to be the greatest honor to be able to walk down that journey with them.

It's really been an honor.

Shawn Liu: Well said, and we're just pumped to have you on as the new National Director joining us here in the Homeless Programs Office. You've made a big impact so far. This is delight for me to have you on.

Okay, I'm officially gonna hand over the, you can't... It's radio, so folks can't see it, but I'm handing over the reins to you. You're now the host.

Steven Tillman: And I'm receiving the reins. I'm taking those reins on, Shawn. Okay.

So Shawn, in your role, tell us a little bit [00:06:00] about yourself and what you do as a Director of Communications.

Shawn Liu: Yeah. What I usually describe to folks is I handle our media relations, so like press releases, talking to journalists and stuff like that, and our non clinical outreach. On this show, we've talked a lot about outreach. That involves social workers going out into the world, into encampments, into shelters, and meeting with homeless Veterans, and I call that clinical outreach.

But we also have non clinical outreach, and this uses a lot of the more traditional media things like billboards and bus ads, TV and radio spots, social media. The more traditional sort of senses of how we get the word out about VA homeless programs and services and let Veterans know about them so that they can come to us for help.

Folks who met me recently just know me as Director of Communications. So they think that I'm a silver tongued kind of just voice or a mouthpiece. But actually similar to you, I'm a social worker by training. I got my start here in VA as an HCHV outreach social worker [00:07:00] in your program at the North Florida/South Georgia Veterans Health System. I used to go out into the streets, into encampments, under those bridges, find Veterans and move them into our programs.

After a little bit of time doing that, I actually spent some time, a lot of time, I say that I grew up in our Housing and Urban Development-VA Supportive Housing, or HUD-VASH program. That's our permanent supportive housing

intervention. So I actually worked with Veterans moving them into their own apartments and then providing them with case management on all the linkages.

And just from there I started moving up the ladder. I became HUD-VASH supervisor, then a HUD-VASH program manager or section chief. And then around 2017, I joined the Homeless Programs Office. You know, I spent a little time as an analyst, and then kind of a generic health system specialist, and now I'm privileged and feel grateful that I get to have this job as Director of Communications.

Shawn Liu: It's really meaningful work for me.

Steven Tillman: I love hearing the journey of each person, especially in the program office. It's not just a title and a name, but there's a person and a robust career. And you are one of the most [00:08:00] storied and well known people, at least in my world. It's a pleasure to hear.

Shawn Liu: Yeah. No, and just as an aside there's a lot of us now in the Homeless Programs Office that actually came up doing the direct services that we're going to talk about today. We, we're not just stuff, we are stuffy bureaucrats, but we're stuffy bureaucrats that have experience in history working directly with Veterans who have gone through these really terrible struggles and are now on the other side of it.

And so we're bringing that clinical background as well.

Steven Tillman: Very true. Alright, Shawn, I think it's time to discuss the dreaded budget.

Shawn Liu: Let's do it. We're gonna talk about numbers!

Steven Tillman: You mentioned the other dreaded B word, billions, and can you help us demystify this a little bit? How big is our actual budget in the Homeless Programs.

Shawn Liu: So our fiscal year 2025 budget, and I just wanna unpack that really quickly. A fiscal year is basically a money calendar. The way a lot of organizations work in the federal government, our fiscal year starts on October 1st, and it goes all the way into the following September 30th. So we're [00:09:00] here in fiscal year 2025, that started October 1st, 2024, and will carry us all the way to September 30th, 2025.

So the numbers that I'm going to talk about today all cover all of the work that we will do in this fiscal year that we are in now.

We did make a helpful article about this. We're going to put a link to that in the description, so you can actually queue it up right now if you're listening on your desktop, your mobile device and you can follow along.

And you're right we actually have a lot of money. A lot of money has been allocated specifically to VA for Veteran homelessness.

For fiscal year 2025, \$3.2 billion. Billion with a B.

Now, that is a significant amount of money. So I wanna kind of reassure folks, is that there is a lot of money and it's not the full money, right? There's actually some other programs for some different federal departments and agencies like the Department of Labor, for example, has some programs for Veteran homelessness.

It doesn't really touch on any other state funding or local funding. This [00:10:00] is specifically VA's budget for Veteran homelessness, \$3.2 billion. And in a little bit, we're going to talk about like, how does that break down? Where does it go? What does it pay for?

Steven Tillman: Yeah, so I think that's a big piece of this, and I always appreciate transparency, whether it's talking to clients, talking to staff, talking to the public at large. So what exactly does the budget pay for? Where does this money go towards? And is it just one big pot of money? Is it going to different locations?

How does...

Shawn Liu: Really great question.

I know we're gonna get a little numbery and technical, so maybe having the article referenced so that you can follow along will be really helpful.

I also wanna acknowledge there's a big concern out there that this money is just going to government fat cats like you and me. You and I are... we're paid fairly, but we're not like, raking in the dough.

But it's not just going to bureaucrats who sit in an office doing administrative stuff. The overwhelming, nearly all of the budget actually goes to direct services

and support for actual homeless Veterans. All the [00:11:00] different programs and services. So I want to acknowledge that as well.

So when you think about where the \$3.2 billion go, I like to break it down into six different categories. The actual term that we use of art is obligations. That's jargony. Six different categories.

Those six categories are Prevention Services, which keep Veterans from becoming homeless in the first place, Transitional Housing, which provide Veterans with good, safe places to stay temporarily, right now, Permanent Housing Supportive Services, and so this is programs like our HUD-VASH program that gets Veterans into rentals with wraparound services, Treatment, so all of the counseling, medical care, substance treatment, all of that other stuff that helps Veterans stay housed, Employment and Job Training for Homeless Veterans, so this is actual stuff that helps Veterans when they feel ready and they want to get prepared to go seek employment to get them set up, and then sundry administrative costs.

[00:12:00] So if you'll hang with me, Steven, I'm going to start unpacking them.

When we talk about Prevention services, these are, again, different services that actually try to keep Veterans from becoming homeless in the first place. And it pays for a lot of different things, such as our Supportive Services for Veteran Families program, which does a lot of prevention, but I also want to acknowledge, as an aside, it doesn't fit evenly in these categories. SSVF also provides permanent housing services as well. It does a lot of different things. We just coincidentally have it here under Prevention.

It covers our Veterans Justice Programs, which help provide outreach and connect Veterans to VA as they're exiting the criminal legal system. It covers our brand new Legal Services for Veterans Grant Program, which helps Veterans address the legal barriers to housing stability. And, our National Call Center for Homeless Veterans, which I talk about literally every episode, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, and connect Veterans to their nearest VA.

The Prevention category totals [00:13:00] \$825 million, and represents about 26% of the budget. So think about a quarter of the budget is prevention.

Next, I'd like to move on to Transitional Housing, and this is gonna really largely cover two major programs. Our Grant in Per Diem program, which awards grants to non profit organizations to provide transitional housing and

supportive case management. It also provides some support for direct service staff and operating costs.

And then also your program, Steven, Healthcare for Homeless Veterans, which not just does our outreach, but also has Contracted Residential Treatment Services that kind of serve as emergency shelter that adds in a lot of really important supportive services as well. And then it also covers we've talked about Coordinated Entry in the past, covers our Coordinated Entry staff that help connect Veterans to different services and organize entire community homeless service systems.

Under this Transitional Housing category, this banner, that's \$603 million. It represents nearly [00:14:00] 19 or 20% of the budget, right? So about a fifth of the budget is these Transitional Housing and sundry bits.

Next up is Permanent Housing Services. Now, although I did mention earlier that SSVF also does permanent housing, this particular category, we're basically talking about our HUD-VASH program. That HUD-VASH program is a collaborative program that pairs HUD's housing choice vouchers, which help make rent affordable, with all of the robust case management and supportive services that we provide at VA. Our part of the budget that I'm talking about today is just VA's side, and doesn't even include the vouchers that are on the HUD side. This is just VA's budget. It doesn't include that.

This part, this Permanent Housing Supportive Services part, is \$1.1 billion. It represents about 34% or nearly a third of the total budget. That's a lot of budget, just going to HUD-VASH and all of the things that entail with providing supportive services for HUD-VASH, and it doesn't even include HUD's budget [00:15:00] for the actual vouchers that provide the rental subsidy.

Got about three more to go.

Treatment is next, and this actually covers a couple different things. Our Domiciliary Care for Homeless Veterans, which provides residential rehabilitative treatment for homeless Veterans, our Homeless Patient Aligned Care Teams, which we've talked about a couple times on this show, that actually provide primary care tailored for Veterans experiencing homelessness, and some other costs associated with providing care for homeless Veterans with chronic mental health conditions.

All told, in this Treatment section, this is about \$370 million, or just over 11% of the budget, so you can round it down to about 10% of the budget.

Next is Employment and Job Training for Homeless Veterans, so this is specifically to help Veterans prepare themselves to get good, decent paying jobs out in the community. And this encapsulates our Compensated Work Therapy, Compensated Work Therapy/Transitional Residence, those are technically two different programs. But those programs help Veterans [00:16:00] work through the more clinical, therapeutic aspects of job preparedness, And our Homeless Veteran Community Employment Services, which directly help the Veterans find employment.

Those two programs in this category, they represent about 250, a little over \$250 million, or about 8% of the total budget. You can probably round that up to about 10%.

Lastly, Steven, is our Administrative Costs. So these are just some of the other ancillary things that are necessary to actually do this work to end Veteran homelessness.

It reserves some money for the National Center for Homelessness Among Veterans. That is our research, education, and model development arm. It is the part of our office that makes sure that we understand scientifically what's going on with Veteran homelessness, how it's changing over time, and making sure that knowledge is communicated to our staff so that they are the most trained, the most informed.

It also covers our Homeless Registry, which helps us collect and analyze data on Veterans accessing our programs and [00:17:00] services. And lastly, it has some additional costs associated with our office, our administrative stuff.

This category, Steven, totals about \$21 million for research and evaluation, \$6 million for operational costs, that's around \$27 million total, and it's basically less than 1% of our total budget, right?

So you can see there, the vast majority is going to some type of direct services, and a very, a miniscule percentage is going to the bureaucratic fat cats like you and me.

Steven Tillman: One thing that's pretty interesting, I think, Shawn, when I talk to people who maybe are not in the VA system or do not know enough about the Homeless Program Office, they will see that there's homeless program social workers, maybe there's people that are locally working towards whatever program that they're assigned to. But what I'm hearing from folks is they're sometimes surprised to hear they're money going toward grantee that partners,

contractor partners, working directly with our community agencies to provide direct services to [00:18:00] Veterans.

So it's really not about admin, it's really not necessarily about more VA staff. There's a lot of money and energy and attention going towards those partnerships. And I think that's something that is not well talked about.

And then also, not only that, looking at the research side of it so that we can look at the effectiveness of the work that we do, so that we can know where we're going.

And I think that's one thing that folks don't always know about. So I really appreciate you spending some time talking about that.

And so, Shawn, it's not just all admin staff from HPO. Is there anything else that this money pays for that we've not yet talked about.

Shawn Liu: You brought up an interesting fact that a lot of this money actually goes to different nonprofit organizations, consumer cooperatives, other entities through grants and contracts.

And that brings up a really important concept about our need to, and how we have scaled, the work. Because this is an immense amount of work that we actually have to do to serve homeless Veterans. And, if we're just limit ourselves to just the VA hospitals that's just not enough bodies to do the work. And a lot of what [00:19:00] we do is award grants and contracts, to other organizations as an extension of us to increase our capacity, like force multipliers, to make sure that we're able to help even more Veterans.

But what I'd like to do to that specific bit, Steven, because I know this is another bit that comes up, it's not just how much money, where does the money go, but is the money just going to pay for bureaucrats like you and me, or is it actually being used to help people, help Veterans?

And I'd like to take that \$3.2 billion and map it a different way and just unpack, from a different perspective, where that money is going. And you can think of this new way of categorizing that money into four different categories.

Direct Services and Staff and Operating Costs for Local Patient Care that actually happens at VAs all across the country, Grants and Contracts, also for direct services. And when I say direct services, people actually helping actual Veterans, directly moving them into housing, National Administrative Staff and

Operating Costs, that's basically you and me and the team here in the Homeless Programs [00:20:00] Office, and then sundry miscellaneous things that don't fit evenly in those three other categories.

So unpacking this a little bit, again, we're talking about \$3.2 billion.

That first category, Direct Services Staff and Operational Costs for Local Patient Care at medical centers, this basically represents the more than 6,800 social workers, peer specialists, nurses, program support assistants, psychiatrists, doctors, and other healthcare professionals who work directly with homeless Veterans. And it's funding for all of the associated costs with patient care for the healthcare systems nationwide to support homeless Veterans, right?

So it's not just the homeless programs, but it's when homeless Veterans enroll in primary care and see their doctor, enroll in other specialty services, get other specialty care as well. It's all of the costs associated with that. When you think about the Direct Services Staff and Other Operating Costs, that is \$2 billion of the \$3.2 billion, or about 61% of the budget. Nearly two thirds of the budget goes to [00:21:00] medical centers for patient care, either directly in the homeless program or all of the other associated costs to supporting homeless Veterans in the VA healthcare system. \$2 billion, nearly two thirds.

Next is Grants and Contracts, and again, this is Supportive Services for Veteran Families, which is a grant program. Grant in Per Diem. Grant is in the name. It actually also includes contracts in your program, Steven, for Contracted Residential Services. And our brand new legal Services for Veterans programs.

Right now, we have, in fiscal year 2025, we basically have around 850 grants that have been awarded to different non profits all across the country, along with 320 contracts, nearly 320 contracts awarded through your program. Collectively, that represents \$1.1 billion, or a little over one third of the budget. So you can see here, we've almost accounted for most of the budget. \$2 billion in direct services staff, another \$1.1 billion for grants and contracts.[00:22:00]

That just leaves a tenth of a billion dollars left, right? And so where that tenth of a billion goes, Is two places, the National Administrative Cost, that's us. Homeless Programs Office, all of the things that are with running our office, that's about \$41 million, or a little, slightly more than 1% of the total budget.

And then lastly is our miscellaneous costs that are things that don't fit neatly into those categories. Other costs such as things associated with transitional

housing, or again care for homeless Veterans with chronic mental health conditions. That totals about \$114 million, or about 4% of the budget.

So just unpack it. Two thirds of the budget, \$2 billion, direct services. About a third of the budget is \$1.1 million, grants going to direct services. Just over 1% of the budget is our office, and then about 4% of the budget is some sundry other expenses as well.

Steven Tillman: And from what I'm hearing from you, Shawn, it's really that when we look at the highest layer, the Homeless Program [00:23:00] Office, the bureaucrats, that's really as lean as possible when we're looking at the larger, broader...

Shawn Liu: Lean is a very great word.

Steven Tillman: I, I think that's an important aspect of this. And what I'm also hearing is that each medical center is not left to figure out and balance their own budget as far as how they're going to provide care for folks that are under our care.

This is something that's hard baked into the budget every year, and it's allocated to the medical centers.

Shawn Liu: Yeah, and you know this way better than I do, Steven, that there's some other technical aspects that get into how the medical centers actually receive that money, but you're right, that a decent chunk of this is completely earmarked just for homeless program staff. That we are just sending money specifically so that medical centers have that money on hand.

They don't have to worry about other parts of their budget. We're just sending that money directly so that they can hire these staff. Because we know we actually can't see the outcomes that we want if we don't actually have staff to provide the high quality care to our Veterans.

Steven Tillman: Thank you for that, Shawn. I really appreciate you really demystifying this and helping us look at it in the buckets and also the percentages, [00:24:00] this much goes here, this much goes here. And in actuality, this is where two thirds of the budget is being held and allocated.

So I really appreciate the breakdown of that, Shawn.

As far as overall impact, how do we know that the budget is doing what it's supposed to be doing and the care is being provided. What is that impact? Is the money being spent in a way that is measurable and that we can see?

Shawn Liu: Yeah, I think as good stewards of the taxpayers money, because again, like, all of this is federal funds, this is all taxpayer stuff. You and I are taxpayers, but basically, almost everybody who listens to this podcast is a taxpayer, which means you should want to know not only where are your taxes going, but is it making a difference? Is it impactful?

So I want to approach the impact in a couple different ways. Each year in homeless programs, we serve about, over the course of a fiscal year, about 300,000 homeless Veterans, right? In a variety of different forms.

Now, we can serve homeless Veterans who are newly homeless, who are entering in our [00:25:00] system for the first time. We have some Veterans who are still in our programs, our systems of care, and are getting their counseling, getting their case management on the path to permanent housing. Some Veterans over the course of a fiscal year leave our program altogether, exit our permanent housing. And then for programs like HUD-VASH, when they get permanently housed, we still provide them with a lot of extra supportive services over the course of that.

So, I want to kind of acknowledge that \$3.2 billion over the course of this coming fiscal year is anticipated to help around 300,000 Veterans who are different stages of their journey.

If you think of that from a per capita lens, that's a little over \$10,000 per Veteran. I will leave it to others to see whether that per capita cost should be more or less. I will leave it up to other smarter folks to that. But that's basically where it's going. This is the upcoming fiscal year.

A similar budget served us in fiscal year 2024.

And right now, we don't have the final numbers yet, but many folks have known that we've had a [00:26:00] major goal this year to permanently house over 41,000 homeless Veterans over the course of fiscal year 2024. We're still awaiting the final numbers. The final numbers actually won't be ready until after this episode airs. But as of our most recent update in August, we've actually already met and achieved that, housing 43,116 Veterans throughout the course of the fiscal year through August, right? And that's an increase of where we've been in the past.

And so part of why we believe this money is being effectively used is because we're using it to house more Veterans than we had previously and we'll continue to provide high quality services for Veterans going forward.

All of the billions of dollars that have been spent over the years, of course, also have been a major driver, I would say one of the most important drivers, of course, in the 52% reduction in Veteran homelessness since 2010.

Now, the most important thing that I want to convey to you is that we're not done. We're not satisfied. We believe that we have done great work, but we're not satisfied, we're not [00:27:00] gonna throw up the peace sign, drop the mic and go home. This is a down payment on the work that we're going to continue to do to accelerate the number of Veterans that we move to permanent housing, to make sure that they stay housed, to better support unsheltered Veterans, and continue to drive the PIT count down, the PIT count being the Point-in-Time count, the number of Veterans counted each year, continue to drive that down and to ensure and get to the day where every Veteran has a safe and stable place to call home.

Steven Tillman: Yeah, I appreciate that, Shawn. Again, the demystifying of the budget and really trying to understand where does it go, is it being used in such a way that's helping our Veterans, and what are those outcomes.

I really think that a big piece of this, and we look at this year in, year out, we look at the PIT count numbers, we see that there's a number, it looks static, Because it's always in the same range, although we've seen a reduction over time.

But I think people always get confused. Is this, the number doesn't seem to change, but I always say to people, it's actually a revolving number. There are folks that are moving out of homelessness, getting well, moving on with their lives, and in some cases, either backing [00:28:00] off VA services or not even using VA services anymore as far as homeless programs is concerned because they're getting well and better and reintegrating into society.

And whether it's circumstances of the economy, socioeconomic status issues or a global pandemic that affects people's housing status, we're seeing that inflow come in and where these are new, unique folks.

And so I think that's something that's sometimes lost, that it's not just the number that's static. It's revolving because there's folks that are coming into our

system and many folks that are leaving our systems and doing well and succeeding.

Shawn, I really appreciate you giving us that high level view of the budget and then breaking it down even further for us.

I'm gonna flip the script a little bit. I know that every episode you ask folks their why. Now it's time for you. I want to know what's your why, Shawn?

Shawn Liu: Yeah, no, this is I'm pumped to be able to finally share it on the show.

A couple things. I usually also on the show say that I come from a quirky military family. What I have always meant by that but never really revealed is, so my grandfather was a World War II fighter pilot. [00:29:00] I don't know if you've ever heard of the Flying Tigers.

The Flying Tigers, for those who don't know, was the first joint Chinese American fighter wing, and he was a Chinese fighter pilot, who was reassigned to the United States to be part of the Flying Tigers. Although he is a Chinese national, he was a member of the Chinese military, he was reassigned temporarily to be part of the Flying Tigers to get training with American fighter pilots.

He is in some ways an American Vet, maybe? I don't know. But I'd like to say that was a big influence in my work today at VA, but I can't really say that. He died before I got to know him. He was actually exiled from China. He was part of the Chinese diaspora of a lot of people who were exiled during the Chinese Civil War there. And he died before I got to know him.

So his military history we only have the generational trauma side of the military history. I never got the patriotism.

You know, and when I talk about the why, Steven, I usually describe folks setting this [00:30:00] up that, it's important to me to convey that this isn't just another job for me I'm not just collecting a paycheck.

Shawn Liu: But, if I could be honest for a half a second, Steven That's how I did get started, that it was just a job for me, it was just a paycheck. Many people, the social workers listening in know, I joined VA in 2008, and for a social worker, the VA was the golden ticket, it paid great, it had a lot of

stability, and I was an ambitious kid, but lacked ambition. I, I wasn't part of anything that was greater than myself.

But when Opening Doors, the first Federal Strategic Plan to Prevent and End Homelessness was announced, and then Secretary Shinseki really made a big commitment to ending Veteran homelessness, it gave this ambitious, but directionless kid something greater than myself to be a part of.

It gave me a mission. It gave me a purpose. And, over the years, like I have found myself loving Veterans, loving the role that I get to play in helping them heal, to grow, to make their lives better.

[00:31:00] And it's been, hopefully, a mutually beneficial relationship. In helping so many Veterans move off the streets and getting into housing, I feel like I've become a better person, too. That I am more civic minded, I'm more mission driven, and I hope that I'm doing right by them on an ongoing basis.

And, the last thing I'll say is that, as a civilian, you like, I always want Veterans to keep me accountable. This is my way of giving back to their service and to their country.

I always want them to set me straight and I hope that till the day I retire that I will continue to be a strong advocate for them.

Steven Tillman: Shawn Liu is the Director of Communications here at the Homeless Program Office.

Shawn, I want to thank you for being our special guest and allowing me the time to be your special guest host.

Shawn Liu: Thanks, Steven. This has been a delight to have you guest host. I really appreciate your time and your friendship.

Steven Tillman: If you'd like to know more about the services that the VA provides to Veterans experiencing homelessness and housing instability, visit us online at www.va.gov/homeless.

And, if you are a Veteran who is homeless or at risk of [00:32:00] 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.

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. [00:33:00]