

EVH - S1EP32 - 2024 Year in Review with Monica Diaz

Monica Diaz: [00:00:00] This was not just about what my team or teams accomplished, it was about leadership at the local level, the community, at the agency, really at all levels. Our grantees they provided unwavering support for the changes and strategies that we really needed to implement this year, ensuring that there was a lot of alignment and integration among VA and the community and the teams. You really then need the team, the leadership, the local facilities, the communities, everybody coming together.

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 National Call Center for Homeless Veterans at [00:01:00] 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.

Hey everyone! It's another December again, so we're back with our end of the year tradition. Once again, with only a few weeks left in the year, let's take a look back at 2024 and see what it was like for Veterans.

What challenges did our Veterans face? What did we at VA accomplish for Veterans? And what lies ahead as we look forward to 2025?

Those are really great questions.

So, to help us reflect on 2024 and to get a look at the work ahead, we brought her back, my boss, Ms. Monica Diaz, Senior Executive Director for the Homeless Programs Office at the U. S. Department of Veterans Affairs.

Let's get right into it. Monica, welcome back to the show.

Monica Diaz: Thank you for having me, Shawn. It's always great to be here. And just happy to discuss fiscal year 24 and what is ahead of us as well in terms of continuing this mission.

Shawn Liu: Yeah, [00:02:00] I admit I'm a pretty sentimental person and in own personal life, I love when folks release the end of the year like listicles of the top 10 this of 2024 or the top 10 that of 2024. I love looking back and reflecting on the things that have happened. And I think you'll agree with me, 2024 was a pretty busy year, there was a lot going on.

And I think a lot of it ultimately positive for the work to help Veterans move from homelessness to housing.

But that's my thoughts. You're the Senior Executive Director for the Homeless Programs Office, and you have a pretty broad perspective. So from your take, as basically our number one leader, what kind of year was 2024 for homeless Veterans?

What were the highlights?

Monica Diaz: Fiscal year 24, was a. you know, a very busy year. But I'd like to add, it was also very meaningful year.

In terms of looking at the outcomes, but also the process to [00:03:00] achieving those outcomes was very meaningful.

Those that know me know that I also like to focus a lot of the process because if the process is good, if it's solid, then we can ensure that those outcomes prevail in the long run.

I think we were very ambitious about what we wanted to achieve. So I think that kept a lot of engagement among stakeholders in VA, but also with the community and others to challenge ourselves to say, "We want to achieve even more this year."

Shawn Liu: I would love for you to reflect a little bit on the ambitions that we set for ourselves this year. And I want to set up this question in a really important way.

Homelessness generally in America has been on the rise, and a lot of this is as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, especially those pandemic era protections going away, rising inflation, doubling into rising rent costs. A lot of people, Americans, Veterans and non Veterans alike, a lot more folks are in need right now.

And, [00:04:00] you know, to be quite frank, there is a palpable sense that the general public, our key stakeholders as well, they're tired of it and they want action. They're kind of like demanding results. And there's not a whole lot of appetite for slow, methodical, sustainable change. There's a big sense, and I know you've been at the forefront of trying to help us through this, but a sense that people in America want results now on homelessness and they want to see really big, decisive action.

And I know because of that urgency that exists in America, that you've been helping to lead the charge for some really ambitious goals.

The other part, too, I want to acknowledge, we've had Jill Albanese, your Senior Advisor and Director of Clinical Operations on several times this year talking about our Homelessness Goals, our goal to house at least 41,000 homeless Veterans in fiscal year 2024. We met and achieved that by a pretty wide margin.

From your perspective, what was it like, and what were the specific things we need to be ambitious [00:05:00] about to make sure that we were meeting this moment and living up not only to the demands of the public, but the critical health needs for Veterans?

Monica Diaz: I love the question and the points that you're making here, and I want to tap into some of that in my answer.

I agree with you. We need to get serious about ending Veteran homelessness. We have to see this with the level of urgency that it is. This is truly an emergency for us to end Veteran homelessness, to have decisive decision to take intelligent risk taking, to challenge the status quo, to do things differently to resolve this.

And so I do agree with you. I think we all are coming into a moment where we just want to see bold change. We don't want to see a little change, a little improvement here. We need bold change.

I think for us in VA, one thing that I feel very proud of is that we put that accountability and that expectation as well on ourselves. I see it on the teams across the nation. I see it on colleagues. I see it as well on our leadership in the last four years in the VA. I see it in the [00:06:00] Homeless Program Office. I see it so frequently that we have that level of ambitions.

The biggest strategy was starting from the level of leadership in terms of prioritizing Veteran homelessness across the organization and making this one of the top priorities for the agency.

And within that, our Secretary gave us new goals for fiscal year 24. Very ambitious goals. And that included making sure that we did not house less than 41,000 Veterans. And we exceeded that in fiscal year 24. We housed over 47,000 Veterans. And that really was if I'm not mistaken, over 116% of that goal.

As a Secretary, he also encouraged us to, say "We're here at the top agency, the same on the VHA side, to support you on this mission.

And we not only want Veterans to be housed, but we want to ensure that they remain housed. And we set up a very ambitious goal. We wanted to ensure that no less than [00:07:00] 95% of those Veterans that were housed would remain in housing. And we achieved 96% of the Veterans that we house in that fiscal year remained in housing. And that is a testament of the effort of the team in providing the support and services that are needed. We not only want to move the Veteran in housing, but we want to make sure that they remain in house, that we empower them, and that they continue in a stable phase in their lives.

He also challenges, and we increased the goal for engagement for unsheltered Veterans, and that included to reach out to no less than 40,000 unsheltered Veterans. We also surpassed that goal engaging over 42,000 unsheltered Veterans.

We had been having these goals for the last three years, and every time we're pushing to increase the expectation and be more bold. And so I think that starting with the strategy of the leadership messaging at the top saying, "This is urgent, this is [00:08:00] serious. We all have to recognize that as a priority," was a catalyst. I do think that was critical for the progress made and he made our efforts again this year more intentional, but also with a high level of urgency.

The leadership strategy was critical as well, not only at the level of the Secretary's Office, but I think at the community level. Leadership is key to end Veteran homelessness. Leadership is key to end Veteran homelessness. Leadership in the community, leadership at the local teams at the VA Medical Center, leadership at the Homeless Programs team at the local level, leadership at the community with our grantees, leadership at the VISN-level. If we have the leaders that are putting ending Veteran homelessness at the top, it really

have a very strong impact in terms of how the community, how those teams then prioritize together the system issues and the strategies to make sure that we're making meaningful, concrete [00:09:00] progress.

Shawn Liu: Yeah, really great points. And you mentioned leadership so many times just now, and I completely agree. Like the last several years have been an interesting case study in the positive impact of effective leadership.

And not just, doing the blowhard talking points of, "Yeah, it's a big priority and da da da da da, right?" But actually backing that up with support. I know that, we've had injections, a little bit of injections of new resources. But we've also been supplementing the work, not just expecting and burning out our staff to do more with less, but really trying to provide them with all of the technical assistance, the know how, the best practices, to really eke out as much efficiencies as they can in their system so they can have a nice, lean homeless service system.

And the results speak for themselves. We've been able to house more and more homeless Veterans over the last three years. And I also want to just acknowledge we haven't done an episode on this yet. If you haven't seen the news, I'm breaking a little bit of news right now for the [00:10:00] podcast listeners.

But we actually just saw the preliminary results of the 2024 Point-in-Time Count. We're going to put a link to that press release in the description. Now, just acknowledging that was actually a result of the work that happened throughout 2023. The PIT Count happens every January and it's the annual effort to estimate the number of people experiencing homelessness in America, including Veterans.

We actually got the results. Preliminary results where Veteran homelessness, we've seen that it's actually decreased by a full 55.6% since 2010, and we essentially see it as a new all time historical low of 32,882 Veterans counted in the 2024 Point-in-Time count. This is about 11, 12% reduction since 2020, and about a 7.5% reduction over the previous year. And that actually is a testament to the kind of the investments that were made last year in 2023, and you're kind of seeing it pay off right now in this record historical low.

And, [00:11:00] it's, a really big testament to making something a priority, setting really ambitious goals, not only holding people to account, right? Accountability is huge. We hear accountability a lot, but supporting these

communities, supporting folks at the local level to do this work and really helping to mold and foster leadership as you just described at that local level.

Monica Diaz: Thanks for sharing the PIT Count numbers. I think its just like you mentioned, a true reflection of the investment made. And that we can actually see the true outcomes. If you look at the different homeless populations, this is an unprecedented result for a homeless population group, for Veterans.

One of the most critical factors in that success, as I mentioned over the last four years. was that consistent prioritization of homelessness by our leadership. And like I said, including our Secretary's office.

And every other week, we will be meeting. I was on those meetings, discussing the status of the efforts. What is working? What is not? What adjustments do we need to do to drive progress? And I do think that level of engagement, the [00:12:00] curiosity, about outcomes and strategies and the willingness, to have the transparent conversations about the challenges, the barriers, the gaps, created a strong foundation for change.

And this was not just about what my team or teams accomplished, it was about leadership at the local level, the community, at the agency, really at all levels. Our grantees they provided unwavering support for the changes and strategies that we really needed to implement this year, ensuring that there was a lot of alignment and integration among VA and the community and the teams. You really then need the team, the leadership, the local facilities, the communities, everybody coming together.

And we did a lot of focus to what we mentioned last year, that One Team Approach.

And the One Team Approach involves integrating efforts among the different programs that we have, seeing the Veterans at the center of services, [00:13:00] addressing the need of that Veteran as a One Team.

We did a lot of intentional collaboration to expand that case management effort through SSVF, our Supportive Services for Veteran Families, and our HUD-VASH program. And this was very targeted collaborative technical assistance for particular communities across the nation. And that also allow us to really look more at what is really needed to either be more agile here with our policies and efforts, or we need to provide additional support, or we need to involve other stakeholders to break down barriers just to get more progress and make

sure that every single Veteran's housed and they're getting the supportive services that we need.

And I will say last on the operational strategies was the significant support of looking at the data to drive in on where are our gaps, where are we doing well and what do we need to do different.

So having those layers of strategies in a framework where you have the [00:14:00] leadership prioritizing the mission was excellent. And it's one of the things that I actually enjoyed the most last year.

Shawn Liu: Yeah, really well said. And you mentioned our One Team Approach. I've been reflecting a lot on the One Team Approach over the last several months, especially in the context of how it has helped us, again, eke out more and more efficiencies in our homeless programs and services to be able to deliver more results for Veterans without adding a bunch of resources, without actually spending a lot of extra money.

We're going to put a link to the One Team Approach Implementation Toolkit that we published this year in the description as well, if folks want to check it out. Warning, it's super technical, at least somebody out there listening in is going to want to be curious to see, precisely what are some of the best practices and strategies that are outlined in there.

And Monica, you talked a little bit about our HUD-VASH program and our Supportive Services for Veteran Families program and helping those programs work together and coordinate better as One Team, and how a lot of that has actually contributed to our increase in effectiveness for housing homeless Veterans.

I just want to [00:15:00] acknowledge another critical milestone that we hit especially with our HUD-VASH program, which is a voucher program. It actually provides rental subsidies to homeless Veterans and really important clinical case management services. We actually hit a really important milestone where at the end of the fiscal year 2024, we had 88,306

Monica Diaz: Mm hmm.

Shawn Liu: Veterans under lease using HUD-VASH vouchers, and this is the highest at any point in the history of the program. We have more Veterans in leases with HUD-VASH vouchers than in the entire history of the program. And a lot of that is absolutely the One Team Approach. A lot of that is, setting these

big ambitious goals. Earlier at the start of 2024, we actually did a series of boot camps.

Monica Diaz: Yes.

Shawn Liu: Technical assistance, training summits, where we help to educate not only VA staff, but our partners at public housing agencies all across the country, some of our grantees as well, in all of the different regulatory flexibilities that HUD-VASH has, and to be able to use those flexibilities [00:16:00] to speed up how fast we are able to house homeless Veterans.

We actually did a little mini documentary on our HUD-VASH bootcamps. We'll put a link to that as well, because it's a little bit interesting to see what the different flexibilities are and how these bootcamps help to eke out some of these efficiencies.

But it's all, again really important stuff and a testament to not just demanding more with less, but supporting the dedicated staff all across the country to better care for homeless Veterans.

Monica Diaz: I agree, Shawn. And thanks for highlighting the outcome of HUD-VASH on the Veterans on their lease. It's unprecedented. I get excited when I hear about that progress because there was so much work that the team put into it.

And I have to say the boot camps they were fabulous strategies, that collaboration with HUD where we actually are doing these meetings at the local level. I attended one myself here at my local community. And they're critical because getting the teams together to really talk about the barriers and really [00:17:00] clarifying policy and all the things that we can do to really get an expedited process for housing Veterans. It was incredible.

And the fact that we're doing it with HUD and the PHAs and bringing everybody together, that was the catalyst for me. Because we're not talking about that in silos. We're being effective and trying to work with other agencies, with the community to make sure that we're all hearing the same message, that we all know the same strategies, that we're all coming together as a One Team to further the mission in ways that we have never done before.

I do want to say, and I don't want to miss this one. That they were a collaborative approach, an instrumental approach with really strengthening partnerships at the community level.

I did mention earlier, the grantees, the nonprofit, faith-based organizations, partners, volunteer services. I can go on and on with the list. So sorry if I missed someone there. But policy has been a cornerstone for our success. Leadership supported and encouraged policies that really emphasized the Veteran's choice, Veterans really getting the ability to have housing immediately and providing [00:18:00] the supportive services.

Congress playing a critical role, as always, in providing immense bipartisan support, and significant investment to Veteran homelessness. I want to acknowledge that, all those investments have allowed us to be today at over 55% reduction in the last decade for Veteran homelessness.

It has been truly a collaboration at all levels of engagement.

And, Shawn, one of the biggest things for me has been this year getting more direct, communication from Veterans that have been grateful about how the services and their lives have changed, thanks to that case manager at the local level, thanks to that new flexibility that Congress granted, thanks to our leadership that prioritized homelessness.

All the elements that came together to change people's lives this year was truly an inspiration.

Shawn Liu: Yeah really well said.

Monica, this has been great. I want to shift gears two more times.

First, I want to get your thoughts about the work that is ahead of us. Now, [00:19:00] one of the things that I've been reflecting a lot on and you kind of just reinforced that just now, and with what you've been sharing on today's episode, which is, we have the right tools for the job.

And the investments that have been made by Congress and our other stakeholders and our leadership at VA, it's working. It's paying off.

But what I anticipate, though, is that although we have been able to accelerate progress, the public and Veterans especially homeless Veterans, are essentially going to demand us to speed up efforts not slow down, but to further accelerate efforts, right?

Everybody wants more homeless Veterans to be housed. Nobody in America wants homeless Veterans, especially the Veterans themselves who are homeless right now.

And I know it's still too early for us to unveil what our new homelessness goals are. So I'm not going to hold you, or making it like unveil stuff that's not ready yet.

But given the fact that we've, seen so much progress with the strategy that we have, what do you see is headed for us for the next year?

Monica Diaz: We need to continue to [00:20:00] push the norm here. And so that demand from the public, from the Veterans themselves that are homeless, we have those demands on ourselves as well.

And so what I see is that we need to continue to achieve more and more. So our goals, I love goals because it really is centered on one united message. We need to focus even more permanent housing placement, but even at the forefront, really preventing people from becoming homeless in the first place, right?

One of the biggest efforts that we just started within the last three years was our internal VA and community surge event to reach unsheltered Veterans. And what that means is surge events were in some of the communities that we gather all stakeholders to make sure that we are taking this as a priority and as an emergency. Reaching out for those unsheltered Veterans, but also housing them right away.

And so I foresee this year expanding the level of urgency in our strategies. Yes, we're housing an incredible amount of homeless Veterans, but we need to house them even more [00:21:00] quickly.

I know that we're reaching a significant amount of unsheltered Veterans. But now, we not only want to reach those unsheltered Veterans, we want to make sure that we have a system in place in each community, consistently reaching and housing those Veterans extremely quickly and making sure that they're connected to supportive services so they don't return to homelessness.

So we're having some strategic meetings, as you're part of some of those with the team to really strategize and have those priorities set for fiscal year 25.

We're happy with the progress made, very proud of the progress made, but we need to continue to push the status quo even more.

With all the investment that Congress have provided I think we're very well positioned. We're very well positioned in terms of resources and flexibilities to continue the mission in more effective ways.

Shawn Liu: Yeah, outstanding. Outstanding stuff.

Monica, this has been fantastic. We really appreciate you taking some time out of your day to, again, give us your thoughts and reflections. One of the things that I heard from you just now is that [00:22:00] although we're really proud of the work that has been done we're not satisfied, with we're not this isn't spiking the football, right?

There are still Veterans who are homeless who are out there who are probably saying, "Yeah, this is all well and good, but what do you what do you do for me? I'm still on the street. I'm still in this shelter, right? Like, when am I going to get help?"

So before we let you go, and as we close out today's episode, what is your message to the Veterans who are still homeless today, who are not housed today, and are essentially waiting for us to serve them?

What is your message to them?

Monica Diaz: You're the reason that we wake up every day to do the mission that we do. Reach out. Reach out to us. We want to serve you. We want to be part of your journey of recovery.

We are here to do that. We want to do that. Give us a chance to do that.

And if you tried and you were not satisfied, give us a second chance to do that, a third chance to do that. We are here for you, we care.

You have earned every benefit that we have here [00:23:00] in VA to serve you. Give us an opportunity to continue to serve you and reach out.

Shawn Liu: Monica Diaz is the Senior Executive Director of the Homeless Programs Office here in the U. S. Department of Veterans Affairs.

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

Monica Diaz: Thank you. Thank you, everybody. And thank you, 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 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 and this year. 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 [00:24:00] care.