

Ending Veteran Homelessness

S1EP6: Jobs, Jobs, Jobs

[00:00:00] **Carma Heitzmann:** Often when you meet somebody, the first question is, "What do you?" And when you don't have a job, that question is really hard to answer. And for many of our homeless Veterans, they haven't had an answer to that question for quite a while. There's also a lot of research that tells us that when you have a job, you are likely to have less problems with substance abuse. You have fewer mental health problems. There's a lot of really good things about work, in addition to just the income.

[00:00:30] **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.

[00:00:44] 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.

[00:01:00] That number again is 877-424-3838.

[00:01:05] Jobs! We hear this in the media and the public consciousness a lot - that people experiencing homelessness should just get a job. But is it really that simple? Just getting a job? In thinking about my own work history, I remember a lot of tasks and activities that I needed to do - and even more support from family, friends, and mentors that I needed to receive - to successfully get those jobs. From resume writing, to interview prep, and to say nothing about schooling and certifications, that was a lot.

[00:01:39] And again, to be clear, I had a lot of help. I had a lot of people investing in me. But what about our Veterans experiencing homelessness?

[00:01:47] For some of our Veterans transitioning from military service to civilian life, they may need help translating the skills that they gained in the military to the open job market.

[00:01:56] Some of our Veterans experiencing homelessness who may have been out of the workplace [00:02:00] for a while, they may need help getting new skills to be competitive in the modern workplace.

[00:02:04] And for some of our Veterans with chronic health problems and disabling conditions, they may need help just even thinking about what the possibilities are for them.

[00:02:14] If you don't have a stable roof over your head, and three square meals a day, all of this can be overwhelming. And yet, many people experiencing homelessness, Veterans and non-Veterans alike, they persevere. They get jobs.

[00:02:27] But it doesn't have to be that overwhelming. We can support them.

[00:02:32] But how? Where would we start? How do we help prepare Veterans for work?

[00:02:37] Those are really great questions. And to help us learn more about how VA helps homeless Veterans get jobs and maximize their income, I can think of no one better to talk to than our very own Dr. Carma Heitzmann.

[00:02:49] Dr. Heitzmann is the National Director for Homeless Veteran Community Employment Services with the Department of Veterans Affairs. She's also a Licensed Clinical Psychologist and has worked in a variety of VA [00:03:00] and public health settings, including inpatient psychiatry, substance abuse, gerontology, behavioral medicine, residential mental health and homeless programs, and even therapeutic and supported employment services.

[00:03:11] Carma, welcome to the show!

[00:03:12] **Carma Heitzmann:** Thank you, Shawn. I'm really happy to be here.

[00:03:15] **Shawn Liu:** Great to have you here. So, this is a really hot topic that comes up in homeless services: the idea of jobs. And, as our national expert for Homeless Veteran Community Employment Services, you are well positioned to help us navigate this.

[00:03:28] But before we get into all of that, I wanna know a little bit more about you. How did you get into VA and what's your role like today?

[00:03:34] **Carma Heitzmann:** As you mentioned, I'm a clinical psychologist by training. I started VA with an internship at VA Palo Alto many years ago. I had the opportunity to work in a variety of settings: inpatient psychiatry, behavioral medicine, residential programs, and of course, employment services. I really was fortunate to have a great breadth of experience. And all of those

experiences have served me well, and continue to serve me well, in [00:04:00] working with Veterans who've experienced homelessness.

[00:04:02] **Shawn Liu:** Full disclosure to everybody: Carma and I hang out quite a bit. We're friends and work on a variety of different projects.

[00:04:07] Part of our friendship has really impressed upon me, in my day to day work in homeless services, just how important employment is as a key component to Veterans' stability and long term success, both during their program participation with us, but then after they leave us and go out on their own. But it's often a component that is not really at the forefront, or sometimes forgotten about. So, can you tell us a little bit about what Homeless Veteran Community Employment Services, or HVCES, is and how do these services help Veterans get jobs across the country?

[00:04:42] **Carma Heitzmann:** You're raising a really good point. When we think about ending Veteran homelessness, the first thing we think about is housing: helping people get homes. That makes perfect sense.

[00:04:51] But, it's also really important to make sure that the Veterans that we're serving have, access to income, from employment or from benefits or from [00:05:00] both, so that they can maintain that housing and really have a good quality of life.

[00:05:04] So, I think we can all agree that work is good for us. We have worked at the VA. We've worked in other places. And it's just part of who we are. It's part of our role in the world. So work is important just because of that. And it gives us a better quality of life, lets us do things that we might not be able to do if we didn't have a job. Financial stability of course is part of it. But it goes beyond that. It helps us identify what our role is.

[00:05:28] Often when you meet somebody, the first question is, " What do you?" And when you don't have a job, that question is really hard to answer. And for many of our homeless Veterans, they haven't had an answer to that question for quite a while.

[00:05:40] There's also a lot of research that tells us that when you have a job, even a part-time job or an intermittent job, you are likely to have less problems with substance abuse. You are less likely to abuse alcohol. You have fewer mental health problems. There's a lot of really good things about work, in addition to just the income.

[00:05:59] But [00:06:00] when you're homeless, there are more challenges in getting back into the workforce. You describe some of the things that you've gone through, and I have as well.

[00:06:08] And when you've experienced homelessness, that's even more complex. And it can be really daunting. You may not have a recent work history. You don't have technical skills, or at least skills that would be effective in today's marketplace. And you're out of practice of work. We're used to getting up and going to work every day and we understand what that means. But if you haven't been able to work for a long time, that whole process is brand new.

[00:06:31] So our staff are located at almost every VA medical center and their role is to help meet Veterans where they are and figure out what's gonna need to happen for that Veteran to get back in the workforce.

[00:06:43] And it's gonna look different for every single Veteran. So we really do take a very individualized approach when our employment staff meet with that Veteran and start talking about, "What would you like to do? Where do you see yourself working? Do you wanna work part-time? Do you wanna [00:07:00] work inside? Do you wanna work outside?" And then looking at any kind of physical limitations or other kinds of challenges that might be part of the equation on what kind of job is gonna be the right fit for that person.

[00:07:12] And when you've been homeless, you may not have some of the things you need to get a job. Even basic things like identification. In most places, you need two forms of ID. And when you're homeless, hanging onto that paperwork isn't always one of the things that comes easy.

[00:07:27] So our staff may start with simple things like helping people get IDs so they can apply for jobs. They may help them get appropriate work clothes so that they can appear well put together for that first interview. They may need help updating a resume or even developing a resume for the first time. And then practicing interviewing those kind of skills are really important. It's very anxiety producing to have to interview for a job when you haven't worked for a long time.

[00:07:54] **Shawn Liu:** Yeah. Hearing the list of all of the different activities and services that the [00:08:00] employment staff across the country do, I was even getting a little bit anxious too.

[00:08:03] I was like, "Oh my gosh, that's a lot. I know. You're right. I remember that too. And, oh my gosh, oh my gosh, oh my gosh."

[00:08:07] It's a very daunting list. And what I heard though is that we, fortunately, have dedicated staff, employment staff, vocational development staff, across the country to take care of these really important tasks, these important services, guiding Veterans through these critical activities so that they can get jobs.

[00:08:27] The other thing that I heard though, that was really interesting and I think, got a little bit deeper than I anticipated, Carma, which was the therapeutic, but also existential benefits that employment can provide. What you described about like that purpose in life reminds me of what the Japanese call ikigai, which is a reason to get up in the morning.

[00:08:46] I imagine that for many Veterans who have been helped by our HVCES staff across the country, that in addition to like extra money in their pocket, of course, also finding a kind of renewed sense of [00:09:00] purpose, or maybe even more like a role in their community. That's a really fascinating point as well.

[00:09:05] When you think about the jobs that we are helping Veterans get connected to, what are those jobs like? I imagine that they range quite a bit, but they're going to be dependent on the individual Veterans, what they're bringing to the table.

[00:09:20] **Carma Heitzmann:** You're absolutely right. There is a really wide range. It really runs the gamut in terms of the kinds of jobs and employment opportunities that our Veterans are looking for. Some of the Veterans we work with have who've become homeless, have had good careers with very specific training and occupations in the past. And they just need some help getting their foot back in the door, getting things updated, and just having a little bit of support to make that leap. But other Veterans that we're working with may not have been successful in the workplace for long periods of time. And they may need a little bit more help, and a few more of those, support services that I described earlier. And they might need to start in more entry level [00:10:00] positions.

[00:10:00] When you haven't worked in 10 years or even 20 years, sometimes you have to start in that first entry level job, and then go from there. Among those jobs are things like customer service, hospitality, maintenance, security,

driving, administration. I mean, you name it. And we really try to avoid assuming that every Veteran we work with is gonna get the same kind of job.

[00:10:21] We don't get into this situation where we say, "oh, this company's gonna hire a thousand Veterans. We're gonna send everyone there." That's great! That's a wonderful opportunity! And if those jobs are going to meet the needs and the interests of the Veterans we're serving, that's perfect. But we would rather look at the individual, what he or she needs, and what they wanna do, because that's, what's gonna make them more successful once they get back into the workplace.

[00:10:43] **Shawn Liu:** I imagine a lot of tailoring, a lot of customizing of services, a lot of matching people's preferences and strengths to the opportunities that are out there. But I also imagine that this is something that relies a lot on partnership. I know [00:11:00] in the homeless programs across the country, we generally pride ourselves as being one of the parts of the federal government that is really heavily integrated and relies a ton on non-VA community partners to make sure this work gets done of ending Veteran homelessness. And what I'm hearing is that we at VA are relying so much on other stakeholders, other partners, whether they be other federal agencies, maybe state or local governments. Or even just like nonprofits and, I guess with jobs as well, for profit companies to really help us. Can you talk a little bit about what those roles that our partners play in helping Veterans get jobs?

[00:11:34] **Carma Heitzmann:** It's pretty obvious. Employment can't happen in a vacuum. You have to have at least one partner and that's the employer. VA is not in a position to hire every single Veteran that we're serving. Although I will say VA is a wonderful and primary employer of Veterans across the country. So that is certainly a resource. But by definition, you have to have other people involved in the process if you're going to help Veterans who've [00:12:00] experienced homelessness go back to work.

[00:12:02] There's a lot of things VA can offer. There's a lot of things we can't, and those are the things that we look to our community partners for. Sometimes things like clothing, equipment, tools, and even training aren't necessarily things that VA can provide for every Veteran that we're serving. So that's when we look to other federal agencies. One of our best partners is the Department of Labor, which isn't too surprising. In particular, their Homeless Veterans Reintegration Programs. We really strive to co-enroll our Veterans with those community agencies and partners, because they can provide things we can't and vice versa.

[00:12:36] It really is working collaboratively, figuring out what that Veterans needs and how can we get it. And that's the role of our Community Employment Coordinators at each VA medical center - to coordinate those resources, to bring them back to VA, to find out what does this Veteran need? And then figuring out where those things can come from and helping to make those connections in a very direct and meaningful way.

[00:12:59] A lot [00:13:00] of our staff are also involved in what we call employment collaboratives. That's about getting other agencies in the community, whether it's nonprofits, Department of Labor, other organizations, to all coordinate and talk together about the Veterans they're serving and share job leads and resources. That really has been very effective in a lot of communities. Everybody gets to share in that success. when that Veteran gets a job, every agency that's been involved in that process gets to share in that.

[00:13:28] **Shawn Liu:** That's a really interesting concept: employment communities and rallying stakeholders together in a collaborative way to work with individual Veterans and getting them employment. I love that concept.

[00:13:39] Carma, I wanna shift gears and I want to get your take on some misconceptions. You've probably heard this as you talk to both staff and different stakeholders across the country. There's this misconception out there that the Veterans that we specifically serve, especially those who may have disabling conditions or mental health problems, maybe they're getting a lot of benefits, [00:14:00] maybe they're getting a lot of housing subsidies to make their housing affordable, then they might not wanna work. Because if they do, then they'll lose their benefits or they'll lose their housing subsidies. And the system disincentivizes them ultimately to getting jobs. Whenever you get those questions, how do you respond? If VA provides all of these different subsidies and benefits for Veterans, why would they wanna seek employment?

[00:14:21] **Carma Heitzmann:** It is common to assume that homeless individuals just don't wanna work. But it is scary to go back to work, especially when you haven't been in the workforce for a long time. We've been talking about everything that's involved in that, and that can be very intimidating. If you haven't worked, you may not have the confidence to take that first step.

[00:14:41] I think sometimes the assumption that people don't wanna work, it's really confusing some of these other issues that individuals may be experiencing that may be getting in the way of them just walking in that door and applying for a job. And housing subsidies are really helpful, but they don't cover

everything that a [00:15:00] Veteran needs to maintain that stable housing in the community.

[00:15:03] They don't necessarily cover food, utilities, and the things that make a house a home: recreational opportunities, opportunities for social interaction. We talked to our Veterans about what do you, what would you like to do if you had a job, even a part-time job, how would you use that money in addition to helping pay part of your rent or helping you just survive in the community?

[00:15:23] And we hear things like, "I'd love to be able to send my grandchild a birthday present." Or, "I'd love to be able to go out to coffee with a friend." Or all these very simple things that we take for granted. And if you have a little bit of extra income beyond what you need just to survive, then you get to do some of those things that really make a difference in our lives. The difference between survival and living.

[00:15:46] These are individuals that may not have really felt part of their communities for a long time. They may have felt very marginalized, that they don't fit in. So when we can help somebody go back to work, that's a huge step in that process of [00:16:00] community reintegration.

[00:16:01] **Shawn Liu:** Those are really great points. And I want to dive in a little bit deeper still. Carma, what about those Veterans with disabilities who are receiving a lot of benefits incumbent upon them being disabled. How do we approach employment with them? I would imagine it's kind of like a, "do not touch." There's like, "do not cross" line. We don't want to jeopardize their disabilities.

[00:16:21] And yet, you and I still have a lot of conversations about the importance of employment for Veterans with disabilities. How do we think through that?

[00:16:28] **Carma Heitzmann:** The first thing I'll say is that we do not make the assumption that just because a Veteran is disabled, they can't work. The approach we take, and I think you mentioned it earlier, Shawn, is one of income maximization.

[00:16:40] How can we help this Veteran have the most income possible from whatever sources are available to them? Sometimes that's through benefits alone. Sometimes that's through employment alone. But very often it's from a combination of those two things. And we don't want Veterans to lose the benefits they're entitled to. Often, it can take a long time to [00:17:00] help

somebody get the benefits that a Veteran deserves and we don't want them to lose them. So part of what our staff do is educate the Veteran and work with their team to understand if you go back to work, how is that gonna impact your benefits? What does that mean?

[00:17:16] And very often there's ways to do both, to continue to receive benefits and to work, even on a part-time basis, without it really leading to a decrease in income. VA actually has developed an income and benefits calculator that helps staff talk with Veterans about the impact of how starting work or increasing their hours at work may impact benefits.

[00:17:39] So you can really walk somebody through the formula and they can see how that will impact them. And very often going back to work, even if it means decreasing benefits a bit, will ultimately result in a higher income overall.

[00:17:53] **Shawn Liu:** That is such a cool idea. You can essentially work within the framework of your benefits. Get up against the [00:18:00] threshold. Maybe even see if it makes sense for them to have fewer benefits, but ultimately more income.

[00:18:06] We'll make sure to include a link to that income and employment calculator that Carma mentioned. We'll include that into the description.

[00:18:11] That's such a really fascinating opportunity there. This has been really, really helpful. Super, super helpful. Wanna shift gears one more time. How else can the public help get our Veterans jobs?

[00:18:23] **Carma Heitzmann:** The simplest thing is to be willing to give a veteran a second chance or a third chance. It's very easy as an employer. You realize that somebody doesn't have a great work history, there's some gaps there. But giving that person a chance, giving them the benefit of the doubt, and letting them try out the work situation, that's a huge thing that the public can do. If you have a job that you'd like to offer a Veteran, if you know of somebody else that does, reach out to us and let us know about that. We actually have a list of our Community Employment Coordinators on an external facing website. If in your community, you would like to reach out and talk to the local Community [00:19:00] Employment Coordinator about jobs that you may have, or that may be coming available, we try to make that really easy to find.

[00:19:06] **Shawn Liu:** We are going to put that link to the Community Employment Coordinators across the country, in the description of this podcast.

So you can just go right to them, figure out who your VA Community Employment Coordinator is and connect to them.

[00:19:16] I really love the idea of not just giving them their second chance and maybe even giving them their third chance. People need multiple opportunities to be successful.

[00:19:24] Carma, before we go, I want to close with something that is our tradition on this show. I wanna close with why.

[00:19:30] Many of the Veterans listening in, they want to know why we're doing this work. That it's not just a job and that we're committed to getting the job done for them. I know all the job puns.

[00:19:40] I, myself, am not a Veteran. My understanding is you're not a Veteran either, correct?

[00:19:43] **Carma Heitzmann:** That's correct.

[00:19:44] **Shawn Liu:** You are one of the most fiercest advocates for Veteran employment that I've run across. What is your animating principle? What is your, why?

[00:19:51] **Carma Heitzmann:** As you said, I am not a Veteran. I don't come from a military family. I really like working with people with complex histories and life [00:20:00] stories. I like the idea that an individual that may have had some challenges, they can get to where they wanna be if they just have a little bit of extra help. I really like that mission and helping somebody get from where they are now to where they wanna be, or at least a little bit closer to where they wanna be. And I think that really describes Veterans who've experienced homelessness. They have complex histories, they have complex life stories.

[00:20:25] And at one point each of them were serving our country. And they had a clear role and a way to contribute. But for a variety of different reasons, either she ran into some challenges or he lost his way. And my goal is to help those who are ready to reintegrate back into their communities through work, have that opportunity.

[00:20:42] **Shawn Liu:** Dr. Carma Heitzman is the National Director for Homeless Veteran Community Employment Services with the Department of

Veterans Affairs. Carma, my dear friend, thank you so much for the gift of your time.

[00:20:52] **Carma Heitzmann:** Thank you, Shawn. It was a pleasure to be here. Appreciate all your work.

[00:20:55] **Shawn Liu:** If you wanna know more about the services that VA provides to Veterans experiencing [00:21:00] homelessness and housing instability, visit us online at 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 number again is 877-424-3838.

[00:21:27] That's all for this month. We've hoped 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.

[00:21:37] Take care.