

EVA S1EP7: Telehomeless: How VA Puts Smartphones into the Hands of Homeless Veterans

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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, I'm your host, Shawn Liu.

[00:00:51] If you're a Veteran who is 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, seven days a week. That number again is 877-424-3838.

[00:01:12] I spend a lot of time on my smart. A lot of time. My smartphone is the first thing that I reach for when I wake up in the morning. It's the last thing that I put down before I go to bed. And it's constantly with me throughout the day. And although I was born in the eighties and yes, I actually do remember a time before smartphones were a thing, today in 2022? It's hard to imagine life without it.

[00:01:38] From the ability to make calls, to texting family and friends, to ordering food delivery, to watching endless hours of streaming video, this little device is indispensable. And that's not even mentioning the ever addictive world of social media.

[00:01:51] But don't worry. This isn't an episode about phone addiction.

[00:01:55] Instead, this is an episode about what happens when you don't have a phone at all, [00:02:00] while experiencing homelessness during a global pandemic.

[00:02:03] At the start of the COVID-19 public health emergency, back in March of 2020, the VHA Homeless Programs Office directed all of our staff across the country to dramatically decrease face-to-face encounters with Veterans. That meant quickly pivoting to things like telehealth and video call solutions, so that we could keep Veterans experiencing homelessness in touch with us in a way that minimized their risk for COVID-19 infection while we work to get them housed.

[00:02:30] But how do you do telehealth with somebody who can't get online? How do you do video calls with somebody who doesn't have a webcam? And how do you stay in touch with somebody you're charged with caring for when it isn't safe to care for them in person?

[00:02:42] This is an episode about all of that. But most importantly, this is an episode about what a small office within VA did to help. So, to help us learn more about how VA is putting smartphones in the hands of Veterans experiencing homelessness. I could think of no one better to talk to than our very own Jennifer Nemeth.

[00:02:59] [00:03:00] Ms. Nemeth is the Business Operations and Staffing Coordinator with the Business Intelligence Team here in the VHA Homeless Programs Office, where she leads our homeless programs telehealth and staffing initiatives.

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

[00:03:12] **Jennifer Nemeth:** Thanks, Shawn. Thanks for having me. I appreciate it.

[00:03:14] **Shawn Liu :** Yeah, really great to have you here. So, this is a fascinating topic. Before we dive on in, though, I want to learn a little bit more about you. So far on this show, we've had a lot of clinicians on to talk about a lot of clinical activities: psychologists, social workers, shelters, outreach, therapy, medicine. You're essentially a new subject matter expert on our show, talking about business operations and staffing.

[00:03:37] And I know those probably are a little bit more jargony terms that our listeners may not be familiar with. So can you tell us a little bit about yourself, how you got into VA, and what your current role is right now?

[00:03:47] **Jennifer Nemeth:** Yeah, it is a little different. I'm not a clinician by trade. I am an administrative support person where my background is in human resource management and accounting, believe it or not.

[00:03:58] And a lot of time is [00:04:00] spent supporting all of our clinicians across the system. I came into VA a little bit over 14 years ago through the medical center, locally. And started in HR, worked through budget. And I had two good foundations in any business, which is having fiscal and staffing understanding. Then soon moved over to the clinical side of things to really understand more about how I can help our Veterans from that perspective and support our clinicians.

[00:04:27] So I worked myself up through the regional office, really understanding the roles and supporting Veterans at the regional level. And then, probably about nine years ago or eight years ago, I came into VA Central Office here to really support on a national level with administrative support around business operations, such as telehealth, which we'll talk about today, as well as staffing, finance. That kind of stuff has been probably ongoing for good eight years now in this office.

[00:04:55] I've also spent a little time outside of the Homeless Programs Office in the Spinal [00:05:00] Cord Injuries and Disorders National Program Office, supporting with business operations. I've been around, Shawn.

[00:05:05] **Shawn Liu :** That's a really interesting journey to this work of ending Veteran homelessness. I know so many people when they think about the homeless service sector and the work that we do, they probably focus a lot on housing, or counseling, or substance treatment, or employment. And I love that you're educating us and bringing us a new perspective of all the behind the scenes work that needs to be done to support all of the clinicians so that they can support our Veterans.

[00:05:30] And I completely agree about those foundational skills that serve you nicely. I joke to a lot of my colleagues and friends that, "Hey, if you wanna get ahead in the world, learn spreadsheets, learn how to do spreadsheets." That'll take you far. And they think you're like, "You must be joking, Shawn."

[00:05:43] You mentioned telehealth and you're actually our lead in the Homeless Programs Office for telehealth and telehomeless. A lot of folks are probably familiar, over two and a half years into the COVID-19 pandemic, about telehealth.

[00:05:56] When we go to our doctor's appointments, or we go to our appointments with our [00:06:00] therapists, we're now logging into like Zoom or Teams or some other video telehealth technology as opposed to going into the office. But for those who might not be as familiar, what is telehealth? And this new version telehomeless, what are those concepts?

[00:06:16] **Jennifer Nemeth:** This is a new concept for the Homeless Program, Shawn. It's something that we didn't typically turn to all the time because we pride ourselves on face-to-face in the Homeless Programs across the system. We need to engage on a face-to-face level, whether it be outreaching, going into shelters, Veterans homes, it was always best face-to-face. So when the pandemic hit, it did throw us into a loop. And so telehealth enhances the delivery of healthcare for our Veterans in their homes. Whether it be in the community, whether it be at an emergency housing location, whether it be at a local hospital, being able to connect our Veterans to their clinicians at VA for any kind of support that they need is what telehealth allows us to do.

[00:06:58] **Shawn Liu :** So many Veterans, not just at [00:07:00] their homes, but also like in encampments, as they're on the street, being able to stay connected to their social workers, to their case workers, to really help them navigate the system.

[00:07:10] What's really interesting about this initiative that you're helping to lead, especially in the context of all of the adaptations that we as society needed to do during the pandemic to keep our civilization trucking along, that in many ways, there were a lot of solutions that, some could argue, would've been helpful the entire time. For many Veterans out there, and for many of our staff supporting Veterans, the ability for us at VA to actually distribute devices to Veterans, get them in their hands, so that we can stay in touch with them, that need was there way before the pandemic.

[00:07:43] I would imagine that's something that is helpful to stick around for a while, like this is a good thing that came out of the pandemic and we wanna do a little bit more.

[00:07:51] When you think about the actual act of distributing smartphones, I'm envisioning, especially because we have tens of thousands of Veterans across

the [00:08:00] country, upwards to over a hundred thousand Veterans that we serve over the given year, that is a big logistical undertaking.

[00:08:06] Can you talk a little bit about, as simple terms as you, can what is it like to distribute that many smartphones to that many Veterans?

[00:08:13] **Jennifer Nemeth:** It's a huge undertaking. When the need arose, just starting off in the pandemic, we're hearing from many of our clinicians, we have over 6,000 staff supporting our homeless Veterans across the the country, that there was a huge concern that they were losing contact with our Veterans. Or our Veterans were becoming isolated. Many of our Veterans, they don't have homes, let alone a cell phone, or a car, or whatever transportation. So when quarantine started happening, there was a mass concern across the system of how are we gonna remain in contact with these Veterans?

[00:08:42] Luckily enough, we have some really great staff that advocate for our Veterans in our National Office and really pursued a huge undertaking with leadership to see about what ability we would have to get devices out to the field and to our Veterans so that they could start distributing 'em to [00:09:00] Veterans that they believe had to assess need for technology.

[00:09:02] Because technology, it provides a crucial mechanism for not only our homeless, but are at risk of being homeless Veterans, our justice-involved Veterans, and it allows them to remain engaged with VA and all our homeless program providers, but also to monitor their safety and their wellbeing.

[00:09:19] And participate in all their preventative healthcare, attend their virtual groups, recovery programs. They were able to, they still are with the phones, but they're able to conduct their virtual housing and job searches. Anything that was in accordance with their treatment goals, we were able to make happen.

[00:09:35] And, had we not had these devices come about because of those concerns and because of the pandemic, Shawn you're right. It's something we've had, probably ongoing for years that we probably could have supported, but the pandemic really put us there because when everybody started becoming quarantined, and separated, and not able to go out into VA at some locations because they were limiting certain access.

[00:09:57] Through the pandemic, you're right. The good that has come
[00:10:00] about from it, it's something that woke us up to what telehealth

services could be like for our program. But it was really the need to get them devices to support that because we didn't have that means.

[00:10:11] We were able to get the contract. Start getting phones out. We distributed 'em to every medical center that was willing to participate. And I believe everyone but one participates. One medical center, they already have a means of telehealth support to their small site.

[00:10:26] **Shawn Liu** : I'm glad to hear that one medical center, the reason why they were not participating in ours is because they already have a robust smartphone infrastructure there.

[00:10:32] And you brought up a really great point just now, acknowledging that access to services, access to care broadly speaking, is something that's really important to VA, that these smartphones don't just create more access to the Veterans case managers and the homeless programs, but also access to their primary care doctors, their mental health clinicians, other services throughout the Veterans Health Administration. These smartphones are essentially creating additional access too, which is fantastic.

[00:10:59] Talk to us [00:11:00] about some of the practical sides of this. Do the Veterans have to pay their own plans? Are they coming with plans? Do the Veterans eventually have to give them back after a certain amount of time?

[00:11:08] **Jennifer Nemeth**: We should also clarify, we have loaner phones and we have phones that we give to our Veterans and they become the Veterans' property.

[00:11:14] Initially at the start of COVID, we had been advised by Congress that we needed to act immediately to ensure that telehealth devices were available to our homeless Veterans in our HUD-VASH program. And VA acted immediately and purchased 10,000 devices in order to get them into the hands of our Veterans.

[00:11:32] Those were our loaner devices. They would allow only VA apps. VA Video Connect is one of those apps, which is an application used by VA that enables Veterans to meet with their VA healthcare providers over encrypted video on a phone, or tablet, or better yet in their computer. And it could be at home or in the community, wherever.

[00:11:51] We originally had those phone devices. But Shawn, what we found is that there were other needs that our Veterans had, which you had mentioned a

second ago, [00:12:00] which is, applying for employment applying for benefits that they made and resources in order to end their homelessness, job searches, housing searches, other things as well as meeting with their VA clinicians.

[00:12:11] And we found that the loaner devices may not be the best suited because they had to be locked down to that VA network. And so essentially what we ended up doing was taking those devices and transferring them over to a non-loaner program, meaning essentially wiping them clean from any lockdown mode, and enabling them as a fresh phone that would allow them to have their VA apps. But in addition, have access to other things such as grocery orders, Shawn. Imagine being quarantined and not being able to get groceries or some kind of food app. Or better yet, not being able to get a ride through a ride share app.

[00:12:43] These things were not available when they were loaner devices. So we turned them into non-loaner devices. Then in addition, purchase additional phones that were considered to be disposable to the government and be able to give those to the Veterans in order to remain connected to them. What each device comes [00:13:00] with is the smartphone, the cube to charge it, but it also comes with a time-limited, prepaid data plan.

[00:13:06] Typically it's one year for the data plan. And at the end of that time, a Veteran has the right to transfer to their own plan which we offer up with some of our major carriers. Pretty affordable plans for our military Veterans. And they offer some other things through Lifeline as well.

[00:13:23] But then they can take them over. If they decide not to take on a plan, they can use them over wifi still and still have access to certain things. We have some of them coming to an end and so we're getting ready for that transition. Our case management teams are ready to support our Veterans as they transition over to self-pay. But, Shawn, I'll tell you the goal of case management is to foster independence, and technology is evolving. It's a necessity, obviously for successful integration into today's society.

[00:13:48] Increasing our Veterans, social connectedness is definitely one of our major goals for case management these days.

[00:13:54] **Shawn Liu** : I know a lot of our social workers have to come up with some very unique, [00:14:00] interesting, creative case plan goals. This actually sounds right up their wheelhouse - creating a long term, sustainable plan to make sure that they could stay connected, not only for their healthcare needs, but for any of the other needs that may have.

[00:14:12] There are probably many people who are hearing about this and may bristle or feel uncomfortable at the idea of VA just giving away smartphones to Veterans. When I think about my own costs for the smartphones, I pay it a lot of money for the actual device. It's a good quality device. Those are costly and to think about sending out smartphones to over a hundred thousand Veterans, they may feel like that might not be the best use of time or might be a luxury. What do you say to folks who think of this as being a little bit extravagant and may not necessarily be a core basic need?

[00:14:46] **Jennifer Nemeth:** Shawn, it is an excellent point. And one, so because we're both taxpayers, right? And this is taxpayer dollars that we all operate with. But I will tell you, this is very similar to the Cardiology Department issuing a heart [00:15:00] monitor to a Veteran. It's the same thing. These are considered medical devices within the homeless programs.

[00:15:06] This is our means of remaining connected to healthcare for our Veterans and ensuring that they get off the streets. That we remain connected to help them get into permanent housing, get into shelters for the night, check in on them. Their safety and wellbeing is utmost important for us.

[00:15:21] This is how we look at it. We look at these as medical devices the same way as cardiology would look at a heart monitor. Or better yet, spinal cord would look at it with robotic legs.

[00:15:30] **Shawn Liu :** That is a really great point. And it reminds me of some of the other conversations that I personally had in the past about some of the other services that we have. I'm thinking about our HUD-VASH permanent supported housing program, where a lot of folks focus on the housing subsidy in the form of the voucher and forget - and I usually like to describe, similar to what you just did now with the phones that - these housing resources that we have are healthcare resources. They're treatment in a certain way.

[00:15:52] **Jennifer Nemeth:** Could you imagine, Shawn, though? To us, 10 years ago, having a cell phone was a luxury. Look at how long we wait these days to give 'em to our kids.

[00:15:59] Now, we [00:16:00] give them to our kids sooner than that, because it's just part of remaining connected and how society is functioning. Our goal in case management is to foster that independence. And so how do we ensure that they are going to succeed in today's society if we can't show them how to answer a phone? Turn up the volume on their phone? How to use an app? Or better yet. Oh, Shawn! How to send an email!? These are things that we take for

granted that we are actually just now teaching our Veterans. We are teaching them the basics of how to use that, how to function today, and to be successful as they live on their own. There's a lot that happens with a smartphone these days that probably was not the thing 10 years ago.

[00:16:35] **Shawn Liu** : You brought up training and helping to educate Veterans on, not only how to use the smartphone, but to navigate this ever increasingly digital world that we live in. We're gonna put a link to a white paper that I know you had worked with one of our medical centers, the VA Salem Healthcare System, on how the homeless program actually created a smartphone training curriculum so that they could educate the Veterans more on [00:17:00] utilizing the smartphones so that the Veterans could get the most out of those medical devices. We're gonna put a link to that into the description.

[00:17:07] Jen, what are the plans for the future? Where do you see the smartphone program going as time goes on?

[00:17:13] **Jennifer Nemeth**: Shawn, if I could continue this initiative forever, I would. Just seeing the success that we've had in the two years alone, to remain connected with our Veterans.

[00:17:22] I will tell you that we are up over 175,000 already this year, which is a huge increase in providing telehealth services. So it's growing. The success of that is something to be said on how we need to continue this initiative to support our Veterans in our homeless programs and those that are at risk as well.

[00:17:39] Our goals are definitely to increase access to telehealth for our Veterans that are experiencing, or at risk of homelessness, and support virtual services delivery to our Veterans. This has been especially important during the pandemic which we've done.

[00:17:51] But ongoing now, this is just something that we need to continue. We need to continue to provide a mechanism for Veterans to stay connected with all of their healthcare providers, [00:18:00] caregivers, their families. Shawn, the success stories that we've heard. It makes it really successful when you hear the stories from Veterans that see their daughter on FaceTime for the first time in 10 years. That are able to call their dad. These are things that they need to support in their mental health in order to continue growing. And for those that have been placed in quarantine, or better yet in hotels due to outbreaks. Whatever it may be. This is something that we need to continue. But you mentioned something about training. Our third goal within VA for

telehealth is to provide the resources and education to increase our Veterans skills and knowledge.

[00:18:33] With today's technology, particularly with the use of smartphones, as of such a thing, VA telehealth services, all these things that we offer, we need to be able to support them in understanding how to utilize these resources. These skills and abilities, they're paramount to functioning in today's society.

[00:18:49] **Shawn Liu** : Yeah, really well said.

[00:18:50] Jen, before we let you go, we have a tradition on this show where we close out with why. It's important for our Veterans to know that, as we're doing this work, that it's not [00:19:00] just another job for us. That we're committed to the mission. That we're committed to making sure that they move from homelessness to housing. I can already tell, and just as an aside I've seen so much of the dedication, the digital blood, sweat, and tears that you've been putting to this initiative and to our staffing initiative as well, both of those are huge logistical undertakings, and you're essentially, my understanding, of one woman show, where does this drive come from? Where does this dedication, where does this intensity to make sure that our Veterans get the care that they need and deserve, where does that come from for you?

[00:19:31] **Jennifer Nemeth**: I was, raised by a very strong mother. My father is retired military for the First Calvary. He was a tanker for 22 years. My sister is active duty with the Security Forces. My brother was Reserves. So I feel like this is my way of giving back is by serving the VA. But then as life moved on, seeing my own mother suffer from mental illnesses, and then end up homeless at one point, Shawn. And my job to support her, just drives it even more to help others and [00:20:00] really have success with making sure that people have what they need.

[00:20:04] **Shawn Liu** : Jen Nemeth is the Business Operations and Staffing Coordinator in the VHA Homeless Programs Office. Jen, my dear friend, thank you so much for the gift of your time.

[00:20:13] **Jennifer Nemeth**: Oh, I appreciate it. And I appreciate all you do, Shawn. I love this podcast.

[00:20:16] **Shawn Liu** : If you wanna 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 is Homeless or at risk of Homeless, 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.

[00:20:49] 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.[00:21:00]

[00:21:00] Take care.