

S1EP8 - 2022 Year in Review with Executive Director Monica Diaz

Monica Diaz: 2022 was a year that challenged us to do more. To think differently. To look more intentionally into the mission. We have the national goal. That was an extremely important part of this year. The great opportunity to see where are the challenges, where are the blind spots, where are the areas that we can do better? It guided a lot of our actions, a lot of our thinking, a lot of our efforts.

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 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 24 hours a day, seven days a week. That number again is 877-424-3838.

Hey everyone, it's Shawn. We're gonna do something a little bit different for this month and maybe even bring in a brand new tradition on this show. It's December. We've only got a few weeks left. Wanna take a look at what 2022 was like for Veterans? What were Veterans facing? What did we accomplish for Veterans? And what lies ahead as we look to 2023?

Also, I want to acknowledge that next week, on December 21st, is Homeless Person's Memorial Day where we take stock and honor those who died while experiencing homelessness. There is so much work that remains to be done. The mission continues, and so with what I hope to be a tradition on this show for many years to come, I can think of no one better to talk to than my own boss, Monica Diaz.

Mrs. Diaz is the Executive Director for the Homeless Programs Office here at the Department of Veterans Affairs, where she is responsible for developing and implementing the Department's policies, plans, projects, and inter-agency initiatives regarding Veteran homelessness. She's also responsible for developing, managing, and executing the program office's budget of over \$2 billion and provides oversight for the integration of operations and ancillary

support for over 5,000 homeless service personnel towards the mission of ending Veteran homelessness.

Monica, welcome to the show!

Monica Diaz: Gracias! Thanks for having me, Shawn. A pleasure to be here.

Shawn Liu: Yeah, this is gonna be great. So, we're kind of on a mission to basically have everybody in our office get on the show once. And I really hope that, each year around December, that you can join us to give a year in review.

What happened? How is the state of Veteran homelessness? What are we doing for Veterans and what's going forward? So, really, really pumped to have you on.

But before we get into that kind of retrospective, for many Veterans, I imagine this is gonna be their first time hearing from you. So as somebody who is basically our national lead for Veteran homelessness, tell us a little bit about yourself.

What's your background? How did you get into homelessness advocacy?

Monica Diaz: Yeah, so the first thing I will say is I'm a military spouse, proud military spouse. And my husband is an Air Force Veteran, so definitely have, at a personal level, a connection with the services that VA provides, what a Veteran goes through, and what the family has to go through when they go to war.

I am originally from Puerto Rico. I'm a mother of three. I started serving the Veterans six years ago when I was a Governor appointee in California. And I worked in Yountsville Veterans Home, which is in Napa, CA, and served the Veteran population there. There is a lot of homeless Veteran there, and aging Veterans.

It was such a great opportunity to be able to look at the different services that were available at the state level, in collaboration with the federal partners, and just to have the chance to really help the Veterans get into a better place of quality of life.

I also did work in a Department of Corrections, and I work as well in a mental health hospital, and in the private sector for years, some people don't know this,

as a skilled nursing facility administrator. And so I did that for a little bit over a decade, I think.

And that was still very close to my heart when I'm looking at the aging population.

Shawn Liu: You've had a career in a lot of different components of healthcare. So at the state Veterans home, in mental health. You've also done some criminal justice work. It sounds like your history though, is based on serving people, Veterans in particular, in kind of very vulnerable states, right? So when you think about Veterans staying at state Veteran homes needing a lot of care, a lot of attention. And likewise for those in the criminal justice system and mental health.

Monica Diaz: All of those Veterans that I serve in the different stage of my career, you are completely correct. They were in need of someone just to support them, but also believe in them. And all those steps of my career just to help people realize that there is hope, there is light at the end of the tunnel.

Shawn Liu: I was actually just thinking as you were saying, a big theme under there is the instilling of hope and how important it is for somebody who is feeling destitute, or down on their luck, or struggling with mental health or substance addiction, or even medical problems that being able to instill hope in them, things can get better, and most importantly, that there are people there to support them is critical. And it sounds like all of this actually positions you nicely to work with some of our country's most vulnerable Veterans, Veterans experiencing homelessness.

As just full disclosure, and people heard this in the intro, like you are my boss. You are my supervisor, but you're also the Executive Director of the Homeless Programs Office. And when I talk about our office, I usually tell a lot of people that the Homeless Programs Office basically serves as the backbone for our whole country's response to ending Veteran homelessness.

And as the lead for that, tell us a little bit, tell, you know, for those, especially for the Veterans listening, what is your role? How do you factor into this big nationwide effort to end Veteran homelessness?

Monica Diaz: So I'm obviously the Executive Director of the Homeless Program Office and your partner. Um, I try to see it as I am an instrument to gather the right people, the right resources, the right partners to serve. To do the best possible work for Veterans. And part of what I do is obviously complex in

the sense, you know, I have the budgetary functions of the program, initiatives to oversee. But I think at the core of all that is to really see ourselves as not the ultimate solution or the ultimate leader, but truly the instrument to facilitate what needs to happen.

I see myself as the means to working with the different programs that we have in HPO, which is a variety of services and help the integration of those so we can really accelerate the processes, that one team approach, when we are helping the Veteran nationwide.

Shawn Liu: You bring up a really great point, and I've seen this a couple times as I've browsed the internet over the years, in different kind of social service challenges or different problems to overcome, whether it's homelessness, or hunger, or climate change, or what have you, that there's a fundamental problem. It's the coordination problem, right?

Monica Diaz: Mm-hmm.

Shawn Liu: And homelessness. We won't go into the alphabet soup of programs since it's long, but there's so many different programs and services, and you also brought up a really great point that there's so many players, there's so many parties...

Monica Diaz: mm-hmm.

Shawn Liu: ...in this space, from nonprofit organizations, to city governments, county governments, states, other federal agencies. And that a big part of trying to get all of these resources and players and parties is coordinating. And it sounds like that's a big part of what we do here in the Homeless Programs Office is trying to get everybody marching to the same drum, walking in the same direction, working towards that shared goal as well.

Taking a look at the last 12 months or so, 2022.

Monica Diaz: Mm-hmm.

Shawn Liu: It's been quite a year.

We've been working on a big goal, the Secretary's 38,000 Permanent Housing Placement Goal. So far, we're doing well. We are a little bit ahead of pace. We think we're gonna end strong.

From your perspective, from your vantage point, what kind of year has it been for Veterans?

Monica Diaz: 2022 was a year that challenged us to do more. To think differently. To look more intentionally into the mission. And so as you mentioned, we have the national goal. That was an extremely important part of this year.

But what that did as well was that it really gave me at least the opportunity, and I know that for all the programs, the great opportunity to see where are the challenges, where are the blind spots, where are the areas that we can do better? Where are the areas that we need to enhance? Where are the areas that we can collaborate more. So tapping into those opportunity because of the goal, looking into each community, where are the challenges and how can we do that was a very strong aspect of this year. It guided a lot of our actions, a lot of our thinking, a lot of our efforts.

The other piece that for this year was realizing more and more, I know we know this, but I think the goal really highlighted this more than anything is that for any strategy, any innovation, any action that we can think of, either at the community-level, here at the Homeless Programs Office, at the partnership-level, the core, the backbone is the staff.

The staff that is doing those effort. That's the first phase that impacts a Veteran. That's the one aspect of everything that, for me, was an eye opener to see how much of a committed staff we have across the nation. And just the collaboration, the hard work, the dedication.

And so if we want to continue to make change for the Veteran, the life of the Veterans, we need to make sure we take care of our staff more, and more, and more, and more.

It's a principle that we all know. It's, it was a great reminder.

I think as well for this year, we know that a Point-in-Time Count show at 11% decrease on any given night compared to 2020 when it comes to Veteran homelessness, which is a great testament to progress. But what it was as well was a strong reminder for this year that there's core principles that we just need to remember and stand by them because it proves that they work.

They do work. Just making sure that we have Housing First at the forefront. Meeting the Veteran where they're at, letting them choose where they want to

go, making sure that we don't have those preconditions to serve them and to give them the best of the best.

One of the things that really impacted the services that we provided was what we saw within the last two years, the resources that we got. And the reality is, Congress really supported us in the provision of resources and that made a significant impact. And that was unique in terms of the outcomes and the work that we did in 2022.

Lastly, not only the resources, but is the ability to apply the resources correctly and strategically in collaboration with our partners. We work very closely with federal, state, and interagency efforts.

And so keeping those principles, I know we all know that, but I think 2022 was just a great reminder about those core principles that we need to continue.

Shawn Liu: That's a really, really great point. And just for the listeners, you've mentioned a couple different milestones there, and we're gonna put links in our description of various press releases and blogs if you want to follow along with some of those events along the way. We'll have it in the description. You can read it as.

Monica, you brought up something really, really important that, I always admired about you and I share with a lot of other colleagues.

Whenever we do something challenging that is scary. And I'm thinking back to the Secretary's Goal from early this year when it was announced, like folks were freaking out. Folks were scared. Right? Um, cuz you're right, like our staff across the country, they're dedicated, they're hardworking.

Monica Diaz: Mm-hmm.

Shawn Liu: But they also are trying to help our Veterans who have high barriers work through all the different barriers.

And one of the things that I'm really grateful that you just mentioned just now is that thing that I share with my friends and family is, when you're going through tough times, remember who you are.

Monica Diaz: Mm-hmm.

Shawn Liu: And remember what you stand for. Remember what those values are, what you believe in, where you can put your foot in the ground and say, "No, these are the things that are important to us and we're gonna carry them through."

Whether it's things like Housing first, our dedication to the mission to Veterans, our dedication to family, our support of each other as providers, as we do this work together. Really, really important stuff in addition to the resources and...

Monica Diaz: Yeah.

Shawn Liu: ...the training and the other support as well, is that really, really sticking true to those values are critical.

Where do you see us going in this next year?

We're about ready to close out the 38,000 Permanent Housing Placement Goal. 2023 is within another couple weeks. What do you see for us in 2023, the work that is ahead for us?

Monica Diaz: I want us to continue to make progress. You know, we can't go back. We have to go forward. We recently, in the Homeless Program Office, have been doing a couple sessions, and you'd be part of this, Shawn right? Looking and updating our strategic plan and having discussions like how 2023 will look like and what should be our focus, right? Based on the demand and the needs of what we have in front of us.

So one of the areas that I foresee will be a very strong focus for us in 2023 is looking at the unsheltered Veteran population and really looking closely at what else can we do? Where do we need to tap into in terms of strategies to continue to make a more stronger progress in that space.

We are also looking very closely at returns and understanding returns. What is causing returns? Why? Where can we tap into supporting more Veterans in that state? We do understand that homelessness is a journey for recovery.

Shawn Liu: Yeah.

Monica Diaz: So we're not surprised to see returns. That's, that will be many...

Shawn Liu: When you say returns do you actually mean like someone gets housed, we help them get housed, but...

Monica Diaz: Yes.

Shawn Liu: ...for whatever reason, they fall back into homelessness again. So we gotta like rehouse 'em again.

Monica Diaz: Thank you. Yes.

Shawn Liu: Yeah.

Monica Diaz: That's what I mean. And so we understand that's part of the journey, right? Because we're here to serve every Veteran, a Veteran with the most complex needs, a Veteran that needs us the most, and the Veteran that sometimes don't need a lot of those supports. We serve all of them. But when we understand that we're serving all Veterans, that means that sometimes in that journey of recovery, we're gonna have Veterans that at times return to homelessness, right? And we're gonna be there for them to reengage them again.

And of course, I have to say, it's gonna be as well continue to accelerate permanent housing placements, right?

Shawn Liu: Yeah.

Monica Diaz: That's never gonna go away. This is the core of our mission. And we always look very closely at our programs to continue to do that.

Shawn Liu: I know that unsheltered homelessness is a big focus for the Secretary, especially with a lot of the work over the last couple years. And just for our listeners' sake, when we think about homelessness, it's usually sheltered homelessness and unsheltered homelessness.

Unsheltered is when you're out literally on the streets, in the woods, under bridges, and that could be really harmful for your health, right?

Monica Diaz: Yes.

Shawn Liu: Exposure to the elements is bad to be clear. Right? So that's a really, really important thing to focus on.

And the other part too, that it's interesting you mentioned about the returns to homelessness, right? Because I hear this a lot when we talk to some of our partners and they serve Veterans, right?

Monica Diaz: Yeah.

Shawn Liu: But it might be serving general Veterans. And a lot of times when I talk about the work to end Veteran homelessness, it's exactly what you just said, that it's not just...

Monica Diaz: mm-hmm.

Shawn Liu: ...serving Veterans as they come in our door. It's serving every Veteran, this Veteran, and that Veteran, and that Veteran, and that Veteran, and that. Individual Veterans and for this mission, if we're gonna be serious about ending Veteran homelessness, it's every, literally everyone.

Monica Diaz: Yes.

Shawn Liu: Regardless of their challenges or their geography or any other circumstances.

Monica Diaz: Mm-hmm.

Shawn Liu: When I've heard you talk about this too, it's about our relentlessness, right? That...

Monica Diaz: Yes.

Shawn Liu: ...Veterans have a right to tell us no. They have a right to, you know, live where they want, but we have an obligation to keep coming back.

Can you tell me a little bit about what that concept of relentlessness, when I've heard you talk about it, what that means to you in this mission?

Monica Diaz: I'm passionate about that. I believe that our Veterans have the right to choose. And sometimes they're not ready to get the help that we're offering at that moment. It is okay, that's fine, right? And we should honor and respect that.

But at the same time, we have to be relentless in not giving up on our Veteran.

Shawn Liu: Yeah.

Monica Diaz: And that's what relentless is. That we don't give up, that we don't lose hope and faith on the possibilities for that Veteran, of the possibility of a quality of life, of the possibility of improvement in service, in access. And we don't give up. We don't give up. We don't give up because we believe and because we care. And so part of ending Veteran homelessness is having that attitude and that heart to not stop giving.

Shawn Liu: This is who we are and this is what we stand for.

Monica Diaz: Yes, yes.

Shawn Liu: So, Monica, as I mentioned at the top, next week Wednesday, December 21st, 2022: Homeless Persons Memorial Day where we honor those people experiencing homelessness, including Veterans, who have died while still homeless.

We are gonna be relentless. The mission continues. For those Veterans who are still out there, what is your message to them for the coming New Year? What do you want them to know about the work that you are leading?

Monica Diaz: We are here to serve them and that they can ask for help.

And they can reach out to us.

There is a team of people that wants to serve, that believes in them. And that they have the right to ask for help. That is okay to ask for help, to reach out to us at any moment. You have heard me say this before, Shawn, any of us can need help, right?

And so I just want our Veterans to know that we are here for them at any moment. And that they should know that they can contact us for support and assistance.

Shawn Liu: Well said, well said.

Monica, before we let you go. Really, really appreciate your time today. Gonna close us off with the tradition on our show. We're gonna close with why. Folks who've been listening in for months now know that I'm not a Veteran...

Monica Diaz: Mm-hmm.

Shawn Liu: ...but I come from a relatively unique Veteran family. One day I might tell that story.

You are a military spouse.

Monica Diaz: Mm-hmm.

Shawn Liu: Why is this work so important to you? We've heard your heart shine through and your values shine through, but as we close out today's episode, why do you rep for homeless Veterans? Why is this work important to you?

Monica Diaz: That is a very good question.

I will say because of the who. And the who is the Veteran. And the who is the people that sacrificed a lot for freedom. The sacrifice for the country. It's the who. The who is bigger than anything else, than any challenge, than any obstacle, than anything else. That's why it's important.

It's because of the who, because of the Veteran.

Shawn Liu: Monica Diaz is the Executive Director of the Homeless Programs Office here at the Department of Veterans Affairs. Monica, thank you so much for the gift of your time.

Monica Diaz: Gracias! Take care everybody.

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 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.

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.