

# **S1EP9: What the New Federal Strategic Plan to Prevent and End Homelessness Means for Veterans**

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On the contrary, what we're trying to do is learn from what has worked so well around Veteran homelessness and also apply that to single adults who are not Veterans.

It's no mystery when you pair housing support with a wraparound healthcare system and access to behavioral healthcare and job supports, that combination of housing and services is what works to end homelessness.

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

This past November, VA and our partners at the Department of Housing and Urban Development and the United States Interagency Council on Homelessness announced preliminary results of the 2022 Point-in-Time count, the annual effort to estimate the number of Americans, including Veterans without permanent housing.

The results revealed that Veteran homelessness declined by 11% since 2020, but also declined by over 55% since 2010. Both are impressive stats, but I wanna spend some time focusing on that 55% one.

Veteran homelessness declined by more than 55% since 2010. This is a really big deal, and you're probably asking, "Well, Shawn, how did y'all manage that?"

There are a lot of important factors that contributed to these significant reductions in Veteran homelessness: the historic investments in housing assistance resources and supportive services dedicated to Veterans, thousands of committed and hardworking staff across the country, the countless partnerships and community collaborations.

But there's one factor that doesn't get a lot of attention: the Federal Strategic Plan to Prevent and End Homelessness. As it turns out, dedicating a ton of money is necessary to solve big and complex problems like homelessness, but money alone is not enough. You need goals. You need direction. You need focused action. And for people experiencing homelessness, including Veterans, that is exactly what the plan aimed to do.

Since 2010, when the plan was first unveiled, it's gone through many revisions, and today I'm excited to see that the most recent update to the federal strategic plan is out now.

So what's new? What's changed in the plan? How does the federal government intend to improve our homeless service systems based off of the lessons learned over the last 12 some odd years, including the lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic? And what does all of this mean for Veterans experiencing homelessness and housing instability?

Those are all really great questions. So to help us learn more about how the federal government plans to address homelessness across America, I could think of no one better to talk to than Mr. Jeff Olivet.

Mr. Olivet is the Executive Director of the United States Interagency Council on Homelessness, or USICH. He's worked to prevent and end homelessness for more than 25 years as a street outreach worker, case manager, coalition builder, researcher, and trainer. He is the co-founder of jo Consulting, co-founder of Racial Equity Partners, and from 2010 to 2018, he served as CEO of C4 innovations.

Throughout his career, Mr. Olivet has worked extensively in the areas of homelessness and housing, health and behavioral health, HIV, education, and organizational development. He's also been the principal investigator on multiple research studies funded by private foundations and the National Institutes of Health.

Most importantly, Mr. Olivet is deeply committed to social justice, racial equity, gender equality, and inclusion for all. Jeff, welcome to the show.

**Jeff Olivet:** Shawn, it's great to be with you today.

**Shawn Liu:** Great to have you here. Okay, so really, really exciting news! New federal strategic plan out. That's fantastic. But before we get to that, tell us a little bit more about yourself and how you got into homelessness advocacy.

**Jeff Olivet:** I first got into homelessness work in the mid-1990s as a volunteer at a day center in Boston. I was living in Boston in graduate school and just started volunteering one day a week. First in the kitchen and then tutoring English as a second language. And then I moved across the country to Albuquerque, New Mexico and got a job working overnights in a 24 hour drop in center.

And, in those overnight shifts, Shawn, I saw so much, pain and suffering and just, really, really tough stuff as people were wrestling, with mental health issues and substance use issues and the, you know, commonality of not having a home was alive and well.

And then from there I got into case management and running housing programs, was involved in a lot of local coalition building work. And then about 20 years ago or so, moved into national policy and advocacy work. And that's the path I've been on since.

**Shawn Liu:** I just wanna acknowledge for those of us who got our starts working in shelters, in transitional housing programs, working with people experiencing homeless, you see a lot. You see a lot of suffering and hardship, but you also, we hope, get to see lives being changed as well through the connection of resources and the dedication of staff. So, there's almost like a bittersweet component sometimes to our histories.

Today you are the Executive Director of the United States Interagency Council on Homelessness, USICH. And for those who are listening on this particular show, Veterans and just members of the public, probably have a general understanding that the federal government is big, but that it's actually way bigger than they probably imagine.

And many different agencies or organizations like USICH, they're probably not familiar with or may never heard of. Can you tell us for those who are coming to this new, what is USICH as an organization and why is your mission so important?

**Jeff Olivet:** We're the only federal agency dedicated solely to the work of preventing and ending homelessness.

And while a lot of federal agencies have homelessness programs and efforts and funding streams, our job is to coordinate the entire federal agencies' response to homelessness so that it's coordinated and targeted and efficient. We hold the collective power of 19 other federal agencies that serve on our council.

As you know, Shawn, that includes VA. It also includes HUD, Health and Human Services, the Departments of Labor, Transportation, Agriculture, Interior, and many, many others. And together we really set the course for the Administration's strategy on homelessness, and we support states and localities in implementing those strategies as well.

**Shawn Liu:** That's, that's pretty big. And I want to acknowledge that recently VA Secretary Dennis McDonough was elected the new chair of the USICH council, the actual council part. So that's another part of VA being an important partner and member of this effort.

Jeff, in your travels both now as Executive Director of USICH, but probably also in your many years working as an advocate, as a researcher as well, you've probably done a lot of myth busting in your days. From your vantage point, especially now as Director, but also with the years and years of history that you have learning about homelessness, learning how this impacts real lives across the country, what do you think are some of the biggest misconceptions that members of the public, that we may have about people experiencing homelessness and the issue of homelessness in general.

**Jeff Olivet:** One misconception is that people choose to be homeless, that people just sort of want to be there or are making a decision to live without a home. And in my nearly 30 years of work in this field, I can count on one hand the number of people I've met who even said they chose to be homeless. And even then I think we take it with a grain of salt.

People simply have nowhere else to go. There's not enough affordable housing. In many communities, there's not enough shelter. So when people are experiencing homelessness outdoors in tents or parks or under bridges, that's not a choice. It's desperation.

Another misconception is just about who is homeless. I think a lot of folks see visible homelessness in their communities and make the assumption that everyone experiencing homelessness has a serious mental health issue or drug

and alcohol issues. And while those issues are certainly prominent in the homeless population, they're by no means the majority.

There's a lot of invisible homelessness, people that the general public just doesn't see. And so you can't say, "If only we would address mental illness or if only we would address drug and alcohol issues." We've also got to support families. We've gotta support young people. We've gotta support people leaving violent relationships. There are just so many faces of homelessness that really break the stereotypes.

I think there's also a misconception that homelessness is rare. That it's sort of a type of person out there, or a small group. And that's just not true. We know that over the course of a year, somewhere in the range of 1.5 million Americans experience homelessness.

And if you look over the course of people's lifetimes, it's significantly larger than that. So the reality is most of us know someone who has experienced homelessness at some point.

**Shawn Liu:** I think it really speaks to the diversity of the experience, the prevalence of the experience as well.

I know about a year or two ago, VA had actually put out a video talking about risk factors for Veteran homelessness and really touching on a lot of the factors that you mentioned today. So often we have these misconceptions that homelessness is just about substance addiction or it's just about mental health. And we'll put a link to this video in the description of the podcast for folks to be able to watch it. But it's really about a confluence and this mix of a lot of different factors, both on the individual level, but from structural levels as well, if I understand correctly.

Things such the availability of affordable housing in your communities, like you talked about, economic opportunities, other neighborhood and cultural factors that can really impact, both for Veterans and non-Veterans alike, whether or not somebody will fall into homelessness.

**Jeff Olivet:** That's exactly right, and I think it's important to disentangle structural factors from individual risk factors. And so if you ask a group of people in the general public what causes homelessness, often the answer you hear are the individual risk factors. That it's someone has mental health issues or doesn't have a job or has a medical condition or has fled a violent relationship.

And while those things can all be true at the individual level, there are plenty of people with mental illness or substance use issues or histories of domestic violence who never experienced homelessness. And there are plenty of people who are homeless who haven't experienced that constellation of risk factors.

So, when I think of root causes of homelessness, I think about things like lack of affordable housing, wages that don't keep up with increased rent costs, the impact of structural racism on communities of color that have really limited the economic possibility for many communities of color.

Those are structural factors that determine pathways into homelessness. The individual risk factors help determine who's most likely to become homeless. So I think when we diagnose the issue, of course we need to work at the individual level. You all do that every day in VA. That's what works to solve homelessness.

But if we don't solve those structural root causes, we will never ultimately end homelessness for all.

**Shawn Liu:** So glad that you brought it up, especially from the frame of diagnosis, right? Because the main purpose of diagnosis is to inform the treatments, the interventions, how you should approach resolving the issue. And you're bringing up such a fantastic point that if you only focus on individual factors, you'll miss opportunities to implement interventions to address these structural factors. And I think this is a fantastic segue now to the main reason why I'm chatting with you today, which is the breaking news, the new federal strategic plan is out now.

When you're thinking about not just diagnosing the problem, but the interventions, the treatment of the problem that may be outlined in our federal strategic plan, give us a little bit of background.

What is the federal strategic plan and how has it changed over the years?

**Jeff Olivet:** Shawn, we are so excited to announce that the plan is out and it's a blueprint not only for the federal government, but also for states and communities as they continue the important work of ending homelessness.

Our plan lays out an ambitious, national reduction target.

We're trying to reduce homelessness and ultimately eliminate it, not just manage the problem. And the plan focuses, in some really big aspirational areas, but

also has a lot of nitty gritty operational implementation strategies. We think it strikes a very good balance of an aspirational drive towards dramatically reducing homelessness and operational specificity. That's what we were going for.

We focus on upstream prevention. We focus on responding to the crisis that's in front of us. And we focus on the work of shoring up housing and wraparound supports that really help people exit homelessness.

The plan is also grounded in a deep commitment to equity. A deep commitment to evidence and data as the foundation for good policy making and a deep commitment to collaboration at all levels.

This plan that we have just released, is the latest in a line of federal strategic plans that go back to 2010. Opening Doors was the first Federal Strategic Plan to Prevent and End Homelessness, and that plan laid out a number of strategies to address chronic homelessness, Veteran homelessness, family homelessness, and youth homelessness.

Other plans since then have built on that work and charted new territory. What we're trying to do is take the best of all of those previous plans and push us into the future in a really ambitious way.

**Shawn Liu:** Yeah, that's really, really exciting stuff. And I've actually read each iteration of the plan since 2010 over the years as well.

But for those who might not have the time to really dive into the plan and to see what the details are, can you give us some highlights? And you touched on some already: the emphasis of racial equity, the emphasis of utilizing data, providing operational frameworks for doing the work.

What are some of the other highlights that you think are important for people, especially Veterans, to know?

**Jeff Olivet:** This plan is focused more on upstream prevention than any previous plan has been. That doesn't mean that we've steered away from the stuff that works around ending the crisis right in front of us. The Biden-Harris Administration is very focused on ending homelessness for Veterans right now and Secretary McDonough's charge to the VA to house 38,000 Veterans during the calendar year of 2022 has been an incredible demonstration of that effort. So has HUD's investment of nearly 400 million in addressing unsheltered and rural homelessness.



So we understand the crisis that's right in front of us. But when we get back to your comment a few minutes ago about diagnosing the problem, right? If all we do is end homelessness for the folks who are homeless today, or who are homeless over the course of this year, ultimately while we will have succeeded for them at the individual level, we will have failed if 900,000 new folks become homeless in 2023. And that's exactly what has happened over recent years. We've seen years where nearly a million people exit homelessness year after year, and yet nearly a million become homeless. And if we don't, then pair the effective housing and supportive services with an upstream prevention strategy all we're doing is bailing the bathtub without turning off the faucet.

And there are a lot of faucets we need to turn off in homelessness overall. We need to look at reentry from jails and prisons. We need to look at behavioral health transitions from institutions and drug and alcohol treatment, mental health care into homelessness. We need to turn off the faucet of foster care.

Around VA and our partners at the Department of Defense, what that means is going further upstream to prevent Veteran homelessness in the first place. What I think that means is good collaboration between our agency, you all at VA, and our friends at the Department of Defense to go further upstream before someone is discharged from military service and enters into civilian life to make sure that they've got all the pieces in place for housing stability and income stability so that they don't ever become homeless in the first place.

Unless we're able to turn off those faucets we're gonna be bailing this bathtub for a very long time.

**Shawn Liu:** I know the bathtub analogy and the faucet analogy has been really, really important to visualize how the problem is so dynamic, how the problem of homelessness changes over time, and the different things that you can do to end it once and for all.

I would love to a little bit on the concept of going upstream because this is a term that is entering our lexicon, our jargon.

And I wanna unpack it a little bit more for our listeners, primarily because given it's focus in the federal strategic plan, we're probably gonna hear this term way, way more. And you touched on an example of what it means to go upstream in context of Veterans with partnering with the Department of Defense so that as Veterans are transitioning from military service to civilian life, we make sure that we're doing all that we can to prevent homelessness there. That's a kind of an example of going upstream as opposed to waiting til months or years after



they've entered into civilian life and then experience housing instability, and then fall homeless, and then we address them. Can you provide a couple other examples of what we mean when we say going upstream to make an impact in prevention?

**Jeff Olivet:** When I speak with Veterans who've experienced homelessness, what I hear from them is, "I wish I'd known more before I left the military around what was available to me in terms of VA benefits and supports, what VA systems have to offer. I wish I was better prepared to manage my own finances and keep my own apartment," and just some really basic stuff. I think this is especially true when young people enter military service, and especially young people coming outta poverty where they serve their time, they serve their country, they maybe fight in wars overseas, and come back and don't always have the skill set to navigate civilian life.

And what I hear from them is we need to be talking about what our transition from military is gonna look like, not just in the month before we leave service, but six months before, a year before. As I think about that, it's really complicated because when folks are serving in the military, they've got a job to do and the military itself has many critical jobs to do. And so how do you weave in this longer term ramp up to transition into civilian life? And how do you also identify who's most at risk of becoming homeless?

You all at VA have done some great work around universal screening for homelessness risk that I think we could learn a lot from, outside the Veteran context, in just trying to flag within the VA system, who's most likely to experience housing instability and homelessness. So I think there's a question of how early in the transition process do we start providing those transitional supports and skill sets? And then there's a question of screening where we're trying to put our finger on resourcing the folks who are most likely to become Homeless so that we're shoring them up before the crisis ever happens.

**Shawn Liu:** Yeah, great points. And we're gonna put a link to what we call the Homeless Screening Clinical Reminder. It's the universal screening that you mentioned. It happens at all of our Veterans Health Administration healthcare sites. We'll put a link in the description.

Jeff, one of the other things that you brought up, which is so important, is not only raising awareness about programs and services for eligible Veterans, but also really helping to engage with younger Veterans, women Veterans, trans Veterans, minority Veterans in such a way that they not only are aware of the services and benefits that are eligible to them, but also in a way that they

identify as Veterans. You touched on how challenging it can be for younger Veterans in military service. I know from my own experience, there are a lot of folks that I've worked with don't necessarily identify with the word Veteran because in their eyes, maybe Veteran is more associated with a badge of honor for having PTSD or is something that is referring to older folks. And so being younger or being a woman, they don't necessarily identify with it, but if you ask them, "Well, hey, did you serve in the military?"

And they're like, "Yeah, of course I did."

So what you're also bringing up, just this fantastic really important point about generally raising awareness to the broadest audience as possible so that somebody who served in the military, they don't know, maybe their friend will tell 'em. Maybe their family members will tell 'em. Maybe they'll hear it on a PSA, or a radio, or a social media post, et cetera, et cetera, so we can get them the services that they.

Jeff, I wanna shift gears a little bit.

You touched on this a couple times already, the concepts of structural racism, about equity, racial equity, and how important it is for the work that we're doing, not only to end Veteran homelessness, but to end homelessness for all Americans. And I wanna unpack that one too, similar to how you unpacked it with upstream, right?

Racial equity is a hot topic these days. It's a common word, and I don't know about you, but I fear that it's used so often in so many different ways that it might be starting to lose its meaning. So can you tell us a little bit, first and foremost, what does race equity mean to you and how does it factor into the federal strategic plan and our overall efforts to end?

**Jeff Olivet:** Racial equity, I believe, is both a destination and the way we get there. So in other words, we are still as a nation moving to a place of racial equality. We have not arrived yet. Despite wonderful gains of the civil rights movement and some real progress in recent decades, we're still a very long way away and we see race hatred on the rise in this country against a lot of groups of color.

We see racialized violence against a lot of people of color in this country. And so there are signals every day that we are far from arriving. When I say that it's a destination and the pathway, racial equity is also a series of strategies by which we try to unpack the data to understand what it's teaching us about who's

experiencing homelessness, and then creating strategies designed explicitly to eliminate racial inequities.

I'll put this in very stark terms. The truth is homelessness is not colorblind. People of color are three to five times more likely than their white peers to become homeless. Now, that doesn't mean there aren't any white homeless Veterans. Of course there are. It doesn't mean there aren't any white homeless young people or families. Of course there are, but the majority of people experiencing homelessness in this country are people of color. With African Americans and Native Americans the most dramatically overrepresented of any group of people experiencing homelessness.

If we close our eyes to that reality, we will continue to perpetuate those racial inequities. If we are willing to have courageous conversations with one another in the government, in the private sector, in nonprofits, at the city and state and national level, if we're willing to confront those painful realities with courage and with clarity of purpose, then we can start creating strategies that are expressly designed to eliminate racial inequities in who experiences homelessness.

Now, of course, we want to see everyone housed. We want to end homelessness for all. In the short term, on the way towards that aspirational goal of preventing and ending homelessness once and for all, we need to eliminate racial disparities on the way there.

**Shawn Liu:** Really well said.

Jeff, I'm gonna start winding down the show a little bit. A major question that I imagine that a lot of our listeners will be asking. Especially any time there's a major shift in how the federal government does things, what does this mean ultimately for Veterans?

I'm sure there's gonna be a handful of folks who will be concerned of any changes in the federal strategic plan potentially leading to slowing down of the work as opposed to speeding up.

What do you want Veterans to know about how the new federal strategic plan is gonna impact them?

**Jeff Olivet:** What I'd like them to know is that this administration is deeply committed to finishing the work of ending Veteran homelessness. You shared the data earlier, since 2010, we've been able to reduce Veteran homelessness by

more than 55%. It is the most singularly successful federal effort to end homelessness among any group in the last 40 years.

We are committed to building on that work, continuing that work. As you said earlier, Secretary McDonough is the chair of our Council, so we are very focused on ending Veteran homelessness and the work VA has done this year alone to house 38,000 Veterans is a demonstration of that commitment.

We are speeding up the work of ending Veteran homelessness, not slowing it down. As you said earlier, we've reduced Veteran homelessness by 11% in the last two years. So I wouldn't want anybody to read that plan and think that we're stepping back from the work of ending Veteran homelessness.

On the contrary, what we're trying to do is learn from what has worked so well around Veteran homelessness and also apply that to single adults who are not Veterans, to unaccompanied women experiencing homelessness, to families, to young people aging out of foster care. And when I look at what has happened around Veteran homelessness, it's been hard work.

There have been so many people engaged in the successful effort over the last decade. But it's no mystery. When you pair housing support with a wraparound healthcare system and access to behavioral healthcare and job supports, that combination of housing and services is what works to end homelessness.

And we'd like to continue doing that with our foot on the gas on Veteran homelessness and also apply those same concepts to all of the other groups that have been slower to see the same kind of progress.

**Shawn Liu:** Fantastic. I'm really, really grateful to hear.

Jeff, before we let you go, there's a tradition on this particular show we always close with why.

I, myself, am not a veteran. My understanding is you're not a Veteran either. But I am deeply committed to this work. This is a passion of mine. This is kind of like my, just cause throughout the course of my life. And obviously it's yours as well. But you're a smart person. I know I have a variety of skills as well. Both of us could be doing a whole lot of other different jobs.

I'm here repping for the Veterans. Why are you here repping for people experiencing homelessness? Why are you so committed to this mission?

**Jeff Olivet:** I believe down to my core, Shawn, that it doesn't have to be this way. When I was born, I'll out myself I'm just over 50 years old, when I was born in the early seventies, we had a surplus of affordable housing and we didn't see homelessness on the scale that we see it now.

We've seen homelessness come in various waves throughout our history, if you go back to the Great Depression and the Post Civil War era and further back. But what I know and what I believe is that we can do better.

And I want to be part of that solution. I see so many foundational pieces coming together these days around racial equity, around the deep evidence base for Housing First and wraparound supports.

We know a lot of what works and we're seeing great success around Veteran homelessness. We're seeing great success at the individual level. I believe that if we can scale up what works, go upstream to prevent homelessness in the first place, and do that all with a deep commitment to achieving racial equity, equal access for people across whatever their gender identity or sexual orientation is, among people with disabilities, I think we can do a better job taking care of each other than we have done in the past.

That's the country I wanna live in. That's the reason I do this work. I want to be part of that solution, and I believe it's possible.

**Shawn Liu:** Jeff Olivet is the Executive Director of the US Interagency Council on Homelessness.

Jeff, thank you so much for the gift of your time.

**Jeff Olivet:** Thank you, Shawn for everything you do and all of your colleagues at VA for your incredible commitment and great work.

**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](http://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 now. 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.