

Special Episode: Veteran Homelessness Decreased by 11%

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Shawn Liu: Welcome to Ending Veteran Homelessness. Your first-hand look into our nation's efforts to ensure that every Veteran has a safe and stable place to call home. From the Department of Veterans Affairs Homeless Programs Office, I'm your host, Shawn Liu.

If you're a Veteran who 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.

Hey everybody! Shawn here. So we've got a special episode for you today because we have some late-breaking news. We're a little bit out of cycle, right? But this is a really important topic. We're really excited to share this information.

This episode's gonna come out on November 3, 2022.

Earlier today, VA announced some amazing news. Actually, VA, our partners at the Department of Housing and Urban Development, and the United States Interagency Council on Homelessness, HUD and USICH, respectively. We just got updated numbers from the 2022 Point-in-Time Count, and what we found is that we basically saw an 11% decrease in Veteran homelessness over January of 2020.

That is fantastic. But you're probably wondering, "Okay, well, Shawn, there was a lot of big things that you just said. What is a PIT count? What do you mean over 2020? How big of a decrease is 11%? It actually doesn't sound that big, but maybe it is big."

Those are all fantastic questions, and so to really help us understand what this new announcement means, not only for Veterans experiencing homelessness but our work in VA homeless programs that lies ahead, I can think of no one better to talk to than my friend and colleague, Ken Mueller.

Ken Mueller is a Senior Business Operations Specialist with the VHA Homeless Programs Office's Business Intelligence Office, where he provides support on a variety of topics related to productivity, gap analyses, reports development, and analysis of homeless programs operations. Ken also has experience leading joint community efforts to address Veteran homelessness, performance improvement, and management of related clinical operations. Not only that, but he is basically our data guru when it comes to the Point-in-Time Count. So this is fantastic to have him on.

Ken, thank you so much for joining us today.

Ken Mueller: Thanks, Shawn. Glad to be here.

Shawn Liu: Yeah. Glad to have you. Okay. This is, this is really, really big news. Um, I'm kind of excited, and I think justifiably so.

We've all been waiting with bated breath since we actually conducted the 2022 Point-in-Time Count earlier this year, in January of 2022. But before we get into what the results are that VA, HUD, and the United States Interagency Council on Homelessness just announced, what is the PIT Count? What is the Point-in-Time Count, and why is it important to us?

Ken Mueller: So it's a good question, Shawn. The PIT Count is a tool that HUD uses to better understand what the homeless populations are throughout the country. Veterans are included as part of this.

It's a pretty large community-wide efforts that are coordinated through what we call our Continuums of Care, or our COCs. Through these local organizations, they organize some groups of volunteers to go out on one particular night, or during the day sometimes as well, to survey those that are homeless or on the streets or in the woods or a variety of different settings to understand what our homeless populations are throughout these different communities. As part of that, they're asking questions around if they said ever served in the military or if they were a Veteran. So we can have that information as a subset of this larger count.

Shawn Liu: I know you've probably participated in many PIT Counts over your career. I know I have as well, woke up at like three or four in the morning to really get started counting as many people who are sleeping rough as they say, or sleeping on the streets and out in the woods and encampments as well.

It's a really important effort. And it's something that we use to actually track our progress, not only in terms of homelessness across the country for all Americans but also specifically for Veterans as well. We've actually been using it as our main stat whenever we talk about the decline in Veteran homelessness. Anytime I say like there's a near 50% reduction in Veteran homelessness or on a given night, there's this many number of Veterans who are homeless, what we're talking about is this particular data set, right? The Point-in-Time Count.

Ken Mueller: Correct. And it's a really good tool. And one thing to understand is that it is just as the name says, a point in time; it's a sample during the course of the year of what homelessness looks like during that one particular day. A lot of times we have to use that along with some other information to kind get the larger picture. But it's a very important, important aspect of measuring the work that we do in our efforts to end Veteran homeless.

Shawn Liu: You are an amazing person when it comes to analysis and data, so I don't necessarily wanna get super into the weeds of this, but can you tell us, just from a high level, what did we learn from the 2022 PIT Count? What did we learn from the Veterans who were counted back in January of 2022?

Ken Mueller: We saw that there was 33,136 Veterans that were counted during that time. One of the challenges is that we didn't actually have a full PIT Count in 2021 due to some of the challenges around COVID-19. However, we can look back to the year prior to 2020. And so if we look at the change between this most recent count in 2022 and going back two years to 2020, we see about a 11% decline over that two year period. Which roughly comes around about five and a half percent decline if we were to annualize that per year.

Now overall, if we were to go back to 2010, we've actually seen a 55.3% decline.

Shawn Liu: Okay. I want to pause a second, though, because I actually sounds like a really big deal. Especially for the last several years or so, in my conversations and presentations, I've always said that there's been a near 50% decline in Veteran homelessness since 2010. So a near 50%. But now it sounds like we've passed that 50% threshold, and we're beyond that.

Like, that's our really big deal, right? Like that, that's important.

Ken Mueller: Oh, absolutely. Absolutely. A lot of effort's been going over through the years, and there's a lot of the resources and programs that have been ramped up during that time.

And so we can see the progress that we've had from putting those programs in place. But it's also important to make sure that we continue the work. The work's not over.

Shawn Liu: I want to break this down a little bit more because you touched on a really important topic about the challenges around the 2021 Point-in-Time Count, last year's Point-in-Time Count.

And you mentioned that it wasn't really a full count. If I remember correctly, the big reason was that, when we think about what makes up the Point-in-Time Count, it's Veterans experiencing homelessness, but Veterans can experience homelessness in two ways, right? There's the kind of sheltered homelessness where Veterans are living in places like emergency shelters, transitional housing programs, and other supportive settings.

They're still technically homeless, for all intents and purposes. Then there's this other version called unsheltered homelessness, where Veterans are living in what we call places not meant for human habitation. And this is what you think of like cars, parks, sidewalks, abandoned buildings, literally on the street, literally the woods, in tents as well. And if I remember correctly, especially from our conversations in 2021, we predominantly did a sheltered count, but we were missing that unsheltered part.

So it's almost like last year we had basically half the picture and that it's not the same, and it's not the case this year. That this year we were able to do, communities were able to do both this year. Did I understand that correctly?

Ken Mueller: Correct. There were some communities that were able to do that unsheltered count last year, but we were not able to get a full unsheltered count.

It was hard to use those numbers last year, but you're correct in the sense that this year we do have a full Point-in-Time Count.

Shawn Liu: Got it. So that's actually why we're looking back two years because it's more of an apples-to-apples comparison.

Are there any insights that you can tell us? Like, what was it like for unsheltered homelessness and shelter and homelessness for Veterans this past January?

Ken Mueller: We're still waiting to see some of the final reports through HUD. However, just looking at the different years, we do see declines in both sheltered and unsheltered.

In recent years, we've had a faster decline with some of our sheltered Veterans, which kind of speaks to us that we really do need to make sure that we're taking care of those Veterans that are unsheltered, our most vulnerable Veterans that may be out there on the street.

Shawn Liu: Yeah, that makes sense. But what I'm also hearing from you, though, is that since this is an early announcement and not the final report, that we actually don't have details of how Veteran subpopulations are doing. Like different locations, urban or rural locations, or with women Veterans, or broken down by race or ethnicity.

Ken Mueller: That's correct. I believe we're gonna be providing a link to HUD's main page for the PIT Count, where you can look back to prior years.

And then, when this information is available for 2022, it will be available there on the same website.

Shawn Liu: We're gonna put a link to where on the Department of Housing and Urban Development's website you would actually go to find the Annual Homeless Assessment Reports.

I wanna get your feedback on a question that I anticipate in the next coming days we're probably gonna get a lot. Earlier this year, in February, right? So a month after when we did the Point-in-Time Count in January.

In February of 2022, Secretary McDonough announced this big goal for VA to house 38,000 Veterans by the end of the calendar year. And I'm sure that a lot of people who are maybe doing the math in their head and they're probably wondering like, "Wait a minute, Shawn, Ken, you have this goal, you even did a podcast episode on it, you're housing 38,000 Veterans during the course of calendar year 2022. But you just said that earlier this year, there was only 33,000 Veterans or so? What's the deal? How does that bear out?"

One of the things that's important for the public at large to understand is that, as you just said a little bit a while ago, that was just like a snapshot, like a single

Point-in-Time. But that over the course of the year, many more Veterans would enter into homelessness.

So we actually have think of this as like a number that's in flux, right? Am I following that properly?

Ken Mueller: Yeah, that's correct. As you pointed out, and I said earlier, this is a point during the year which is the name Point-in-Time. So usually, it occurs around the month of January, where they do these surveys and volunteers go out.

But it's just that one day. So we know that Veterans may become homeless at different times throughout the year. You have this kind of inflow and outflow, in addition to this one time during the year that, that we count Veterans.

Shawn Liu: I want to talk quickly about what the average American who's listening on the podcast can do to help.

I've said this quite a few times on this podcast, but if you're a Veteran who's Homeless or at risk of homelessness, we definitely want you to call the National Call Center for Homeless Veterans 877-424-3838. I'm actually gonna say that again at the outro. It's staffed 24 hours a day, seven days a week. We'll connect you to your nearest VA for assistance.

Not only that, if you're a landlord or a housing provider and you're listening onto this podcast, and you have housing units, and if you're interested in renting to Veterans because we need housing units, all of this work is dependent on landlords willing to rent to Veterans. We're gonna put a link to our landlord's page that you can click on and learn more about how you can help.

If you're a business owner and you have job vacancies, hire Veterans. Hire Veterans experiencing homelessness and housing instability. We're also gonna put a link to our Community Employment Coordinator list. Our contact list so you can connect with your local Community Employment Coordinator in your community, and get connected to really ready and able to hire Veterans and really help them gain their independence too.

And for anybody else who's just listening in, keep the Call Center number handy, 877-424-3838, so that if you encounter a Veteran experiencing homelessness or housing instability and they need help, you know the number to give them as well.

Ken, this has been fantastic. Before I let you go, I wanna do what is the tradition on this particular show.

We always end with why.

You and I have gone back for many, many years cuz you're a fellow Floridian too. You're based out of Orlando; I'm based out of Jacksonville, Florida. We both have our histories in social work as well. We're both social workers. But you know, I'm doing communications now.

You are doing data analysis and business intelligence, which is fantastic. You're doing such an amazing job, but I wanna understand you a little bit better.

We haven't actually talked about in our years of working together. What's your why for this work? You have so many talents, so many different things that you could have gone into, so many different missions you could have been a part of. But you're here with us for Veteran homelessness. What is your why for this work?

Ken Mueller: Thanks for asking. There's a lot of different things that may have played into that. I'm sure some of my younger experiences, different things through college, opportunities to do some volunteer work, and just being able to work with not just Veterans, but just individuals in general that just needed a variety of different assistance, which kind of got me into the interest in the social work field.

But I also had some interest in business. And to be honest, I struggled between what do I go to school for: social work or business? And I decided on social work and went for my Master in Social Work.

It was during that program that I actually had a conversation with one of my professors and just explain that struggle where I had these two interests and could I use them together to help the purpose or mission of some of these social initiatives that are going on in our communities?

And I was really encouraged by that professor to if you do have that and you wanna pursue business training, that she thought it would be a great combination. And so she encouraged me to also pursue my Master in Business Administration, which I actually did right after my Masters in Social Work.

And went on as a clinician, cuz I felt it was important to first get a good clinical aspect before I got too much into the administrative side. And being able to see

that transformation of someone not just getting into housing, but what that housing did for that individual, to be able to access health care that maybe they weren't accessing before and employment at different points and just be able to see the overall change in the individual, provided a lot of purpose and meaning to the work that I did.

I always remind myself, and even others that I talked about, even though I'm more heavily on the data and information side now, I always remember back to those Veterans that I met in the woods or in the streets and saw how they transition and transformation they had when they got into housing.

I'm leaning more towards the business side or the analytics side now; we're not just in the business of producing or manufacturing widgets. We're actually in the business of improving the lives of Veterans and getting 'em into housing.

Though I miss that aspect, getting out into the field and working with the Veterans out on the streets or in their homes, I know that I'm providing some support or resources to those that are still doing this important work to collectively be able to improve how we're doing it and that we can reach a even larger group of Veterans that are out there.

Shawn Liu: Ken Mueller is a Senior Business Operations specialist with the VHA Homeless Programs Office. Ken, my friend, thank you so much for the gift of your time.

Ken Mueller: Thanks, Shawn. I was glad to be here.

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 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.