

NEWS UPDATE: VA Exceeds Goal to Permanently House 38,000 Veterans

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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.

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.

Shawn Liu: Hey everybody, Shawn here. We've got another news update for you today. If you recall back to our second episode on this podcast, we did an episode with Jill Albanese, she was the Director of Business Operations here in the Homeless Programs Office, on the 38,000 Permanent Housing Placement National Challenge that the Secretary of VA put out for us.

Shawn Liu: Well, we're past 2022. We're actually in 2023 now, as everybody can tell on their calendars. So, what were the results? How did we do? You're probably gonna see some other stuff throughout the media today, but VA's making a big announcement today: the results of the initiative.

Shawn Liu: So, I could think of no one better to bring back on the show to talk about how VA did, and how VA did it, than our very own Jill Albanese. Let's just jump right into it. Jill, welcome back to the show.

Jill Albanese: Hey, thank you, Shawn! I'm so excited to be here.

Shawn Liu: Yeah. Really, really great to have you back.

Shawn Liu: Before we dive into the big news, congratulations are in order. You've got a new job here in the Homeless Programs Office. You're not the Director of business Operations anymore. You're the Director of Clinical Operations. And I know that comes up with a little bit more job responsibilities.

Shawn Liu: Can you tell us a little bit about what your new role is here in the Homeless Programs Office?

Jill Albanese: Yes, happy to. And thank you, Shawn for that reminder that I did get a promotion. I am now the Director of Clinical Operations, and the Senior Advisor to our Executive Director.

Jill Albanese: Basically what that means is that I supervise our permanent housing programs. So I supervise Supportive Services for Veteran Families, and I supervise our HUD-VASH program. And I also supervise a couple of our support service programs.

Jill Albanese: So I supervise the Homeless Patient Aligned Care Team and our employment services. And I also supervise our Business Intelligence Team, which is our awesome data team.

Shawn Liu: That is a lot of new responsibilities there, Jill. And it's interesting how before you were in a role of supporting the office.

Shawn Liu: Now you're supporting the people that support the people that support the people that care for our Veterans. There's this kind of trickle down bit of support, but basically you're starting to oversee now a lot of the programs and services that actually provide assistance directly to the Veterans.

Shawn Liu: That's... that's a big job.

Jill Albanese: It is, but you know, my passion is housing Veterans and so it has been great to get my foot back into the clinical piece of it.

Shawn Liu: Excellent. And I remember from when you came on our episode, I don't know, several months ago, that was a big part of your journey into the Homeless Programs Office, HUD-VASH, SSVF, a lot of the permanent housing programs, the alphabet soup, so to speak. So it's interesting to, not quite full circle, but maybe like a new spin on some old parts of your journey.

Jill Albanese: Yes, absolutely. Again, my passion is these permanent housing programs and housing Veterans, so it has been fantastic to be able to work with those programs again so closely.

Shawn Liu: Awesome. So, this 38,000 Permanent Housing Placement Goal, right? Big deal. It's been our major focus over this last year. I know you and I have been so involved in it. For those who are just tuning in now and have not been with the podcast since our inception, what was the 38,000 Permanent housing Placement Goal?

Shawn Liu: Where did it come from and why was it important for us to?

Jill Albanese: Yeah, Shawn, we have, you and I have worked so much on this together.

Jill Albanese: Over a year ago, last fall, Secretary McDonough, he traveled to Los Angeles and he was visiting the medical center there. And he saw that there was a large encampment of Veterans who were experiencing homelessness very close to the campus. You could really see that they were basically just across the street from the campus.

Jill Albanese: And so with all of the resources that we have at VA to help Homeless Veterans, he had asked, "Why are these Veterans over here? Why are these Veterans still homeless?"

Jill Albanese: And he said to us in the Homeless Program Office, "I wanna see these Veterans housed." And so he set a very ambitious goal for Los Angeles saying, "I wanna see 500 Veterans housed by Christmas, by the holidays. I think it was even called something like Home for the Holidays.

Jill Albanese: And so, Los Angeles worked very hard. They got 500 Veterans housed, or on a path to permanent housing, very quickly. And once that happened, the Secretary said, "I wanna see something else. What are we gonna do next?"

Jill Albanese: And so, that's where the 38,000 Goal came from. We looked at the previous year's Point-in-Time Count and noted that there were 37,000 Veterans who were homeless on a single night in January and we said, "Well, we wanna house those Veterans plus more." So we set this very ambitious goal of housing 38,000 Veterans in the calendar year 2022.

Shawn Liu: Yeah, I remember when you told me that story, I was like, "Oh my gosh, yes. That's gonna be kind of a relatively ambitious goal for us."

Shawn Liu: Okay, so today is the big announcement day. We're doing this episode. How did we do?

Jill Albanese: Well, Shawn, we did great. I am really excited to announce that we actually housed 40,401 individual Veterans. And so we actually exceeded the goal by over 6%.

Jill Albanese: It is just huge. Our folks in the field have been working incredibly hard to get this done. And when we looked at the numbers and broke them down, we saw that we've actually placed an average of 3,367 homeless Veterans into permanent housing every month.

Shawn Liu: Yeah. That is amazing. I, wow, I'm so excited to, to hear. Um, let's, let's kind of unpack this a little bit more though, right? So when we say permanent housing, I know we do a lot of jargon on this show. What does that actually mean? Permanent housing? Are we moving Veterans in hotels? Are we moving in into like rentals?

Shawn Liu: What's going on? What do we mean when we say permanent housing?

Jill Albanese: Right. So permanent housing means something very specific to us at VA. I know there are all types of housing and sometimes we might say, "Well, somebody is living in a hotel, so aren't they housed?" For us at VA, permanent housing means that a Veteran has their own place with a lease.

Jill Albanese: So it's not temporary, it is truly permanent housing. We do not count hotel placements. We don't count transitional housing or temporary housing or any type of interim housing as a permanent housing placement. It really truly is a Veteran has their own place. They have signed a lease, they have a landlord, and so those are considered permanent housing placements so these Veterans are truly permanently housed.

Shawn Liu: I know how we think about permanent housing, in some instances that also includes when Veterans reunite with families, maybe get some roommate situations going on. And in some amazing, not very common, but amazing instances, some Veterans actually move on to home ownership, right?

Shawn Liu: Like, it's not just the keys to an apartment that they have a lease. It's a key to a home for which they have the deed,

Jill Albanese: That's right. We've had a few Veterans who have actually transitioned from homelessness into home ownership, which is just absolutely amazing.

Shawn Liu: Yeah, we don't hear it that often. When it does, it's amazing.

Shawn Liu: So Jill, I remember when this initiative was announced and we were setting up the planning for how we were gonna support the VA medical center homeless programs and community partners who were actually gonna do the work to house all of these Veterans experiencing homelessness.

Shawn Liu: And I remember we, and you probably remember too, everyone was panicked. We were kind of freaking out a little bit wondering, "Oh my gosh. How are we going to house this many Veterans giving all of the challenges that exist in 2022?" Rent costs going up, right? Staffing issues everywhere. Inflation was starting to spiral outta control at the time and, and people were panicked.

Shawn Liu: And I remember into the summer, right? The press release came out in February, late February. We started really deploying technical assistance late March, early April. By summer we start getting data in, but we're not quite on track.

Shawn Liu: But then, we're not just on track. We exceeded the goal, as you said, by like 6%.

Shawn Liu: How did we do that?

Jill Albanese: Yeah, Shawn, I will never forget that first call that you and I did together where we invited all of our community partners and our VA staff working in the field, and we saw over and over and over in the chat, "What about the affordable housing crisis? We can't find rents for our Veterans. How are we supposed to do this?"

Jill Albanese: And you're right, folks were panicked. They were really, really concerned about this ambitious goal.

Jill Albanese: One of the things that we did here in the Homeless Program Office, and Shawn, you were certainly a part of this, was that we shifted our

focus from being a bunch of programs working to house homeless Veterans to one team. So we really wanted to say we're all in this together. Everybody has a part to play. Everybody has a role to play. We are one team. Every Veteran was our collective responsibility.

Jill Albanese: We recognized that there were some communities that were really going to struggle with this. That the housing costs were exorbitant, that there were a lot of Veterans to be housed. And so we did target some pretty intensive technical assistance to those communities.

Jill Albanese: We provided opportunities for experts in the field to talk through how they were engaging with landlords and how they were getting folks housed even in really difficult environments. So, we provided those opportunities every other week basically. And we just made the commitment that we were going to have these touchpoints with the field every two weeks and give folks that opportunity to dial in and again, ask questions, talk about what they were doing.

Jill Albanese: And I think that did help. And it brought folks together.

Shawn Liu: That was a lot for sure. And just want to clarify for folks like technical assistance, right, is a lot of consultation, education, maybe training, sharing of strong and innovative and best practices so that we can learn from each other as communities. And I know like a lot of people don't realize how big VA is. And VA, especially the Health Administration, a healthcare system, but also a bureaucracy.

Shawn Liu: And one of the things that I know as we got into Spring, Summer, especially into the Fall as well, that was really meaningful for the staff who were supporting our Veterans to have that one-on-one face time with our technical assistance providers, our data gurus, some of our national leaders, you.

Shawn Liu: And how that really empowered them and gave them the motivation, will, dare I say even like the belief that they could accomplish this.

Shawn Liu: I remember when, you and I did that kickoff call for the first technical assistance way, way back in March, and we were wrapping up the call and I was like, "Jill, can we do this?"

Shawn Liu: And you were like, "Yes, Shawn we, we could do this." And I don't know to what degree either of us, were kind of like faking it till we make it, or if we truly believed it in that moment.

Shawn Liu: For the Veterans listening in, I don't want it to seem like we're taking this big giant victory lap and we're spiking the football, because the mission continues, right? There's still more Veterans to be housed. We are not done yet. We want to see more measurable reductions in Veteran homelessness. We wanna help those individual Veterans and their families who are still experiencing homelessness out there. But this is an important watershed moment for the system because in 2022-2023, still feeling the effects of the pandemic, we're actually still under a public health emergency right now. Still have rising rent costs. Staffing is always an issue across the board. It was really important for us to get our stuff together so that we continue to make good on our promise to Veterans.

Jill Albanese: Yeah, agree. I think one of the things that I also wanna mention is the role that our, Business Intelligence folks played in this, and that they...

Shawn Liu: Just really quickly, who are, who are they?

Shawn Liu: Who are our Business? Because that's like a corporate kind of name.

Jill Albanese: Our Business Intelligence folks provide the data. They gather data, they provide it in a way that makes it understandable and useful for the field.

Jill Albanese: So they put together a dashboard that the field could use. Not only did they put together a dashboard so folks could see how many permanent housing placements they were making on a monthly basis. They also provided assistance and reached out and said, "Do you understand how to use this data?" And if they didn't, that Business Intelligence team really took the time to meet with each individual medical center to make sure that they understood what their data meant and how they could use it to meet the goal.

Shawn Liu: Yeah, the dashboard was really revolutionary for us to deploy on the national level. And there was a whole view that let folks know, by name, which Veterans, not just an aggregate number of statistics, whatnot, but individual Veterans, names who were still homeless, but in our programs right now, that if we gave them more TLC, if we gave them more attention, We would be able to get them housed.

Shawn Liu: What I really, really love about our Business Intelligence team is that they take the stats, they take the numbers, and find ways to humanize it for us so that we remember, "Hey, we're serving people, right? And hey, these are

specific people that we can help right now cuz they're on the cusp of getting housed."

Shawn Liu: Can you tell us a little bit about what's next? We're not done. There are still more Veterans experiencing homelessness out there. What's that in store for us?

Jill Albanese: We certainly will continue to focus on permanent housing placements. That's our mission. That's what we do.

Jill Albanese: We have set some specific goals for our Homeless Programs Office and one of those is to focus on the unsheltered. That is a population that in sometimes is most vulnerable. They need our help the most. We just do not wanna see Veterans sleeping in their car, sleeping in tents, living outdoors.

Jill Albanese: We really wanna focus on making sure that those folks are safe and that they're permanently housed.

Jill Albanese: The Secretary may set a goal and so we look forward to the challenge.

Shawn Liu: We look forward to the challenge.

Shawn Liu: Jill before I let you go, for those listening in, how can the public help us out with this initiative, especially as we go into 2023, 2024, and the years to come?

Jill Albanese: There are lots of ways that folks can help. If you are a landlord, we need you to help us.

Shawn Liu: We need you.

Jill Albanese: If you're a landlord, we need you to help us for sure.

Jill Albanese: If you know a landlord, we need you to reach out to your landlord friends and ask them to assist. If you are a mayor or an elected official, reach out to landlords on our behalf.

Jill Albanese: If you're an employer, employ a Veteran. We have Veterans who have skills that are ready to work. So, we ask that you employ Veterans if you are an employer.

Jill Albanese: If you find a Veteran, if you see a Veteran who is experiencing homelessness, please reach out to us and you can get ahold of us through our Homeless Veteran Call Center.

Shawn Liu: I'm gonna put links to everything that you just mentioned into the description. And of course, as I close out every month we'll have the number to the Call Center.

Shawn Liu: Jill Albanese is the Director of Clinical Operations and Senior Advisor to the Executive Director here in the VHA homeless Programs Office. Jill, my friend and colleague, thank you so much for the gift of your time.

Jill Albanese: Thank you so much, Shawn. It was a pleasure 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.

Shawn Liu: 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.

Shawn Liu: 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.

Shawn Liu: Take care.