

EVH - News Update: VA Meets Goal to House 38,000 Homeless Veterans Two Months Early

Shawn Liu: [00:00:00] 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's 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. We've got another news update for you today. Really, really exciting stuff. Many of you know that we've been working on new calendar year goals for 2023, and we've got some updates for you.

This is coinciding with a press release that we've done this morning. So, it won't be in the podcast feed. But if you visit us on our [00:01:00] website, va.gov/Homeless, it'll link to the press release. You can check it out.

But in order to get the 411 on what the news update is in the context of the goals, how we're doing, and most importantly, what's gonna be going on for the rest of the year, we brought her back. You know her, you love her. Jill Albanese, the Director of Clinical Operations here in the Homeless Programs Office.

Let's get right into it. Jill, welcome to the show.

Jill Albanese: Thanks, Shawn! Happy to

Shawn Liu: be Yeah, great to have you back again. I think you have the record now of being the guest who's been on this podcast the most. So, congratulations. I'm gonna send you your plaque in the mail. Um. Speaking of good news, we've got some good news today. We've got a news update on progress towards our calendar year goals. But before we get into the update, will you just do us a favor and remind us what our goals were for 2023.

Jill Albanese: So exciting be here by way. So our were to house 38,000 Veterans. And, so just as a reminder, that was [00:02:00] the same goal that we had last year. It was the same calendar year goal.

We also added some, I guess you would call them sub goals, this year. So added some sub goals around returns to homelessness. We just didn't wanna see Veterans who we housed, fall out of housing and become homeless again. So we added a pretty ambitious goal to ensure that at least 95% of the Veterans that we housed during the calendar year remained in housing. We also added a little sub goal to that piece. even We know that some Veterans will fall, back into homelessness. It does happen for a variety of reasons, But when Veterans do become homeless again, we wanted to ensure that at least 90% of those Veterans were housed again, or at least at the very least, put back on a path to permanent housing. So we have those three goals, if you will. Then in addition to that, we were even more ambitious and we recognize that unsheltered homelessness is just, something that we really wanted to tackle, really wanted to address this calendar year. So we also [00:03:00] added a goal around unsheltered homelessness and committed to doing outreach and engagement with at least 28,000 unsheltered homeless Veterans.

Shawn Liu: That was really helpful, and just to kind of unpack this for our listeners really quickly, because the update that you have today for us really has to do with two of the, maybe three or four, depending on how you count them, goals.

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Shawn Liu: just to kind of summarize. Permanent housing, we would house another 38,000 homeless Veterans. There was a second kind of sub goal in there that you mentioned about prevention of returns to homelessness and Veterans rehoused again if they do fall into homelessness and engaging with unsheltered Veterans. And there's two of those goals, the permanent housing one where we were gonna house 38,000 homeless Veterans, and the unsheltered engagement where we would engage in 28,000 unsheltered homeless Veterans, that those are basically, you count up to the goal and when you hit the goal, you met it. But with the prevention of returns to homelessness, that one's a little bit unique where we're still gonna be tracking it for the rest of the year because it's actually like a point in [00:04:00] time. And that may shift over the course of the year.

So without further ado, Jill, what's the progress update? How are we doing?

Jill Albanese: Well, I am so excited to announce that we actually have already exceeded the permanent housing goal. So we have housed over 38,000 Veterans. And this really speaks to all of the work that's happening out at all the medical centers and with our community partners, our grantees through SSVF and GPD. It's just amazing work. 38,000 Veterans, placed into permanent housing, just, you know, changing their lives. And so it is fantastic.

I also wanna announce that we have already exceeded unsheltered goal. So we've already engaged with and provided outreach to more than 28,000 unsheltered Veterans.

So again, it is just really exciting and, and again, just speaks to all of the great work that folks are doing out there in the communities to help homeless Veterans.

Shawn Liu: Yeah, and it also represents really, really importantly because we focus a lot on the numbers. We focus a lot on targets and stats and metrics and all this stuff like that. But it also [00:05:00] represents 38,000 Veterans, actual humans whose lives are now better. They were formerly homeless. And in many ways the experience of homelessness is one of the most dire, probably outside of like, you know, feeling at risk for suicide, and there's a lot of overlap, probably one of the most dire situations a person, a Veteran can go through. And so these Veterans helped it's not just metrics, it's actually people.

If I'm looking at my notes correctly, just to kind of be very, very concrete with the numbers for the Veterans who are permanently housed, it looks like it was 38,847 Veterans housed actual Veterans, and that represents about 102.2% of the goal. So we exceeded the goal so far by 2%. And Jill, correct me if I'm wrong, this is actually just as of the end of October. This episode's gonna go live on November 29th, so it's basically almost a full month ago.

So with basically two more months to go worth of activity, worth of work to house Veterans, we actually [00:06:00] can house even more Veterans by the end of the year. Am I understanding that correctly?

Jill Albanese: Yes, you're absolutely right. First of all, thanks for saying that these are Veterans that's important to note. These are real Veterans who we have helped change their lives. So that's important to note and agree with your assessment of this is probably one of the most traumatic things that can happen to anybody. So this is life changing to those folks. And you're absolutely right. We still have two more months to go. We can still house and help many more Veterans in the next two months. We can and we will.

Shawn Liu: And then also just for the completionist thorough folks here, for the engagement of Unsheltered Veterans, the goal was 28,000 unsheltered Veterans engaged. And what we mean when we say engaged with unsheltered Veterans, like we're going out and we're meeting them for the first time. We're building a relationship, rapport with them, building trust with the goal of getting them into what I've been calling, like our system of care. Getting 'em into VA for lack of a better term. And if I'm reading my notes correctly, so as of the end of October, it's 34,498 [00:07:00] unsheltered Veterans, who we're engaged with this represents 123.2% of the goal, blowing way past it, and continuing on.

Just as a reminder, there's generally two different types of experiences of homelessness. You have generally sheltered and unsheltered. Sheltered is kind of like you're literally an emergency shelter, exactly what it says on the tin, maybe a transitional housing program. I remember during the pandemic, a lot of our programs made great uses of hotels.

But then unsheltered homelessness is literally out there in the streets, in the woods, in encampments, under bridges, massively even worse detrimentally for a Veteran's health. And the goal, if I understand correctly, Jill, the idea is like being proactive, like going out.

We're gonna find you and we're gonna bring you home. We're gonna bring you in with the goal that if we're engaging with you, and we also have to house 38,000 Veterans, well, you're right in front of me. Let me go ahead and house you too.

Did I get the whole kind of like arc correctly?

Jill Albanese: Yeah, you absolutely did. And I would also just add that these folks that we've counted, This is not just a [00:08:00] matter of us going out providing very light touch outreach. This is actually connecting those folks and getting them into our system of care, as you mentioned, which... this takes time to do. It does take, time to build relationships, to build trust with folks who may be living in encampments, living in their cars and experiencing that unsheltered homelessness.

So, this is really a huge accomplishment for our outreach staff.

Shawn Liu: Really a testament to their dedication, their commitment, leaving no Veteran behind.

I also wanna acknowledge, we have those other sub goals that you mentioned, Jill, the prevention of homelessness and getting Veterans, rehoused, if they do fall back into homelessness. In contrast to those other two goals, this one is one we're still monitoring because it's not like a count up, and then once you hit the finish line you've achieved it. It's still in flux, right? So, as of the end of October, 96.2% of the Veterans have remained in housing. As of the end of October, about 3.8% of the Veterans we housed fell back into homelessness. That works out to 1,476 Veterans, [00:09:00] but 93.1% of those Veterans, or 1,374 have either been rehoused or placed back in a path to rehousing.

We're not done with either of these goals, but this one in particular, if I understand correctly, this is still in flux, we still have to kind of be vigilant and keep close eye on these Veterans and support them to make sure they stay housed.

But then if they fall back into homelessness, we gotta even support them even more and get them back into housing.

Jill Albanese: Yeah, absolutely. And to be clear, we are not stopping. We're not gonna stop the work on any of these goals. I mean, even though we have met the permanent housing placement goal and the unsheltered engagement goal, we're still gonna continue to house Veterans and we're still gonna continue to engage with folks who are unsheltered and get them connected to care. But you're absolutely right with this, return to homelessness and getting folks back on a path to permanent housing, that's something that we're just gonna monitor throughout up until the end of the year. And then we'll see where we're at at the end of the calendar year and see if we've met that goal or not.

Shawn Liu: Jill, I wanna shift gears a little bit, and ask what is probably gonna be a really obvious question that on its surface may feel like [00:10:00] there's a whole bunch of different dimensions to it, it's kinda the one that probably a lot of folks are thinking. Last year we ended up housing 40,401 Veterans.

We exceeded the goal by around 6%. I'm predicting that we're gonna exceed this probably by, I don't know, I'm just throwing something out there, maybe like 12%, maybe, you know, pretty high.

How on earth were we able to house so many Veterans during this year and essentially meet the goal two months early?

Like, what, what gives, how did we do that?

Jill Albanese: One of the things that worked well was we set a goal right after we had met the previous calendar year goal, and we just kind of kept you know, with that momentum that we had built up. So, we learned a lot from, last year when we did the permanent housing placement goal. We just continued to implement some of those best practices and things that we learned. I think one of the things that we did too this year was we really took a look at those returns to homelessness. We really wanted to understand that. And so once we assessed why folks were returning to homelessness, we were able to [00:11:00] pivot and provide more interventions that could catch those folks earlier.

Shawn Liu: The momentum point is really interesting and I remember you and I had a lot of conversations last year when Secretary McDonough gave us that first goal, and we were kind of like warning folks, especially like senior VA leadership. It's like, y'all, you set the goal is great, but don't expect the number of Veterans who get housed each month to jump automatically, like it's gonna take time to build a machine, to build that momentum. So it's gonna like be a little bit slow in the beginning of the months as we get oriented and we get our groove going. And then as Summer hits, and then Fall, it'll pick up and we'll make up ground. And like you're raising a really, really great point, which is at least for our ability to house homeless Veterans, we're still riding that momentum. It's, more like a freight train in a way. It takes a little bit to get out of the station, but once it's going, like it's going and it's kind of hard to slow it down at a certain point. And so in many ways it sounds like that system that was improved, last year carried [00:12:00] over to this year.

Jill Albanese: We did improve the system to a certain extent. We still have work to do, but that really helped us. That really helped us keep that momentum going.

Shawn Liu: Yeah. And one other thing that I'm kind of noticing, especially with the unsheltered goal, right? To be a little bit frank, we've kind of absurdly blew right past the goal in a way that we were kind of scratching our heads. And one of the things that is interesting is that, although that unsheltered goal was about a 10% increase from the Veterans that we engaged with last year.

So it was intended to be a stretch goal, or the previous year, I'm sorry. So it was intended to be a stretch goal. And when you compare it to the permanent housing goal, 38,000, 28,000. There's about a 10,000 person difference there. But we're ending up maybe only about 4,000 Veterans off. And I'm wondering is it the case that we're essentially seeing more Veterans? Like is the need out there so great?

I know you and I have been chatting, especially the end of last year when we [00:13:00] were talking about, well, what are, what should we advocate for in terms of goals for this year? And one of the things that we were thinking was that, as we house more Veterans, there are gonna be fewer Veterans to house, but in many ways we're blowing past the numbers.

Is this a sign that the need out there is just really, really great? Like there are a lot of Veterans who are in need of services.

Jill Albanese: Yeah, Shawn, the need out there is really, really great. So we are in an unprecedented housing crisis right now. Housing is just not affordable. For so many folks. One of the challenges is that if somebody does become homeless, it's really hard for them to get back into housing on their own.

It, it's hard for anyone at this point in time so that is a real challenge.

Shawn Liu: I think that's one of the things that if we asked our frontline staff across the country, they're not having difficulty finding Veterans to house. Like there are a lot of Veterans out there and I think we are reflecting that essentially in the metrics and the numbers, being able to house so many Veterans, being able to engage with so many Veterans.

Jill, are there other things that we've been learning this year about Veteran homelessness that might be different from last year or new [00:14:00] insights based off of the fact that we are working on somewhat different goals and kind of revealing new, trends or insights about how we provide services or the challenges and needs that Veterans have.

Jill Albanese: Looking at the reasons for folks returning to homelessness, and one of the things that we looked at when we looked at data and analyzed it. And I wanna give a shout out to our Business Intelligence team, as well as our National Center on Homelessness, who really took a deep dive into looking at data returns. One of the things that we noticed is that there were certain placements that did not stick as well as we would've hoped. And I'll give you an example. Sometimes our Veterans will say that their permanent housing option is gonna be to stay with a friend or even with a family member. What we noticed is that a lot of times those are not long-term placements and that, folks just are not always able to keep those placements if they're living with family or friends. And so we really wanted to be more careful about looking at those placements and making sure that this is absolutely, a roommate situation where somebody's [00:15:00] gonna be on the lease or, that it is a family member that they are going to be able to stay with long term before pulling back help. So

another one of the things that we looked at is how much aftercare, if you will, do we need to provide to Veterans who we exit into permanent housing. And this turns out we needed to provide a little more in some instances than we had been. So again, it was another opportunity for us to improve the system and to provide better care to Veterans.

Shawn Liu: Yeah, that reminds me of the concept that we talk about with Housing First. And Housing First is one of our guiding approaches, guiding philosophies, where we move Veterans into housing and then provide 'em with a lot of supportive services. And we have to try to remind folks over and over that Housing first is not housing only.

We're not getting Veterans apartments handing over the keys and saying, "Peace out. Good luck." We're providing services and support. But what it seems like is a big trend is that especially for those Veterans who they're not staying permanently housed in our system of care. They're reuniting with family or friends. They still need the same, similar, maybe not the same, but similar support as maybe some of our other Veterans [00:16:00] in our shorter or longer term permanent housing programs. That's really, really important stuff.

Also, I've been reflecting on just some of the other aftercare stuff that you've mentioned, not just with Veterans who move in with family or friends and it's meant to be permanent, but it turns out it's not, but other kind of things about what happens to Veterans after they exit our programs, and the fact that support changes over time. Some seasons they may need a lot of support. Some seasons they need a little bit less support. But I think what's the most important is that they remember, and know that we are here to support them. And I think for me, this has been raising up a lot of opportunities to be more intentional and proactive with that support.

So, Jill, before we let you go, again this episode is gonna air November 29, 2023. We essentially have a month and a couple days left in the year before this goal wraps up. And then we're gonna be going into 2024, but then also doing all of the final tallies and the preps to take stock [00:17:00] of all of the work that's been done. What is gonna be our focus on in this last month or so?

Jill Albanese: Well, we have a few focuses. Of course, I mentioned that we're not gonna stop. We're gonna continue to house Veterans. In the next two months, we're gonna continue to make sure that those Veterans don't fall back into homelessness. One of the things that we're really focused on right now, I mean, it's getting colder out and the weather's bad almost everywhere, we are focusing on the unsheltered folks. So we're really doing a push in many

communities to get those folks who are still unsheltered into one of our interim housing programs. So that's a focus, certainly for December. And again, we're gonna continue to do the great work that we've been doing and just support the field as much as we possibly can.

Shawn Liu: Jill Albanese is the Director of Clinical Operations here in the Veterans Health Administration's homeless Programs Office. Jill, my friend. Thank you so much for this fantastic update. Looking forward to bringing you back in January for the final results.

Jill Albanese: I cannot wait. Thank you, Shawn.

Shawn Liu: If you want to know more about the services that VA provides to Veterans experiencing homelessness and housing instability, visit us online [00:18:00] at www.va.gov/Homeless. And if you're a Veteran who's 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.