

What's behind the decline in homelessness among US veterans?

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The struggles of America's veterans, disproportionately affected by homelessness, have long been documented. However, a coordinated effort on the part of federal, state, and local governments, as well as veteran advocacy groups has started to make a significant dent in the problem of veteran homelessness.

On the whole, veteran homelessness has decreased 47 percent since 2010 and the number of unsheltered veterans has been slashed by more than half, according to a report released Monday by the Obama administration.

"The most recent point-in-time count report really reflects the progress that is being made in addressing what has been unfortunately a real fixture in our community's landscape for unfortunately years and years and years." Thomas O'Toole, the director of the US Department of Veteran Affairs' National Center on Homelessness among Veterans, tells *The Christian Science Monitor*. "Really to be able to see the ongoing progress that's being made, I think speaks to good policy and good implementation of that policy."

Speaking at the Disabled American Veterans annual meeting Monday in Atlanta, President Obama called the nation's commitment a "sacred covenant." "I don't use those words lightly. It's sacred because there is no more solemn request than to ask someone to risk their life, to be ready to give their life on our behalf," he said.

A promising blueprint

The current strategy on homeless vets takes a multi-faceted approach. It not only bolsters transitional and permanent housing options but also provides additional services, such as mental health care, addiction services, and chronic disease management, with the aim of arming newly housed veterans with the tools and support to avoid falling back into homelessness.

"This is really looking at not just managing homelessness but moving homeless veterans into permanent housing and keeping them in that permanent housing with case management and case support," Mr. O'Toole says. "That represents, I think, a significant change."

A linchpin in the current strategy is the HUD-VASH voucher program for rental assistance for veterans, which has seen bipartisan support in Congress.

At the local level, communities have emphasized housing-first and rapid re-housing policies to address the number of homeless veterans. Housing-first policies place veterans immediately into permanent housing instead of transitional housing or shelter, and eliminate previous barriers and requirements for being eligible for housing.

This a gradual shift in strategies for fighting homelessness, Matt Leslie, the director of housing development for veterans in Virginia's Department of Veterans Services tells the *Monitor*.

"Oftentimes, housing was kind of earned. So you'd step your way through places: You'd do well in an emergency shelter, then you'd work your way to transitional, then you'd work your way into housing," Mr. Leslie says. "But that was leaving some of the really vulnerable people with potential mental illness, substance abuse, they'd just get left out.... My belief is a housing plan should be started on Day 1."

This had led to the implementation of housing-first policy, which takes away some of the barriers to obtaining housing. Increasingly, policymakers and advocacy organizations point to permanent housing as stabilizing factor that enables the formerly homeless to start to address other issues.

The government is also focusing on prevention by providing short-term support and relief to provide services necessary to keep veterans from becoming homeless.

"It's really that collection of interventions and a huge commitment from our leadership and from Congress to support those changes that really defines and describes the successes we've had," O'Toole says. "I think it's exciting because it really proves that something can be done for something that has not always been considered fixable."

The Obama administration had aimed to end veteran homelessness by 2015, with its 2010 Opening Doors program. The government has spent \$16 billion on the program with mixed results, as The Washington Times reported.

The amount spent has been criticized by some, including Rep. Jeff Miller (R) of Florida and chairman of the House Veterans' Affairs Committee. Representative Miller told the Times he believed "VA increases in spending on homeless initiatives are growing every year and far outpacing reductions in veteran homelessness," which "calls into question the efficacy of VA's efforts."

Successful states

However, the effort has led the government to certify that two states – Connecticut and Virginia – and a number of cities have functionally ended veteran homelessness, according to the Department of Housing and Urban Development's Mayors Challenge to End Veteran Homelessness.

"It's really that we're making veteran homelessness, rare, brief, and nonrecurring," Leslie says. The program led to increased communication between local, state, and federal agencies, which helps veterans get the right resources for them, Leslie says.

As of June 2016, Virginia has housed 2,188 homeless veterans since October 2014, Leslie says. The state now houses veterans in an average of 90 days.

In Connecticut, a concentrated effort to improve communication among the different entities involved and an increase use of data has contributed to its gains, Lisa Tepper Bates, the executive director of the Connecticut Coalition to End Homelessness (CCEH), tells the Monitor.

"The biggest piece is getting daily communication between the mainstream homeless world and veteran-specific resources," she says. "We're really working together as one team ... instead of working in two different silos."

For example, when a veteran checks into a shelter in Connecticut, VA homeless providers receive an alert from a state-wide database. This allows veterans more access to the resources available to them.

In 2015, permanent housing was secured for 766 veterans in Connecticut, and a point-in-time check of veterans in emergency shelters identified only 45, a 44 percent decrease since 2015, according to CCEH.

What's next?

Despite the progress made, Leslie says a continued effort is necessary to continue to identify veterans who become homeless.

"Housing is very fluid," he says. "We have individuals who, for a range of reasons, fall into homelessness."

A continued dedication is necessary to keep making progress, O'Toole says.

"The successes identified underscore also the importance of how this work needs to be continued," he says. "There will continue to be people at the risk for homelessness, and the infrastructure and the services are things we see as needing to continue in order to be able to maintain these gains."