

Inside a Successful Stand Down: *Tips from the Experts*

Stand Down, a community intervention established in 1988 by Dr. Jon Nachison and Robert Van Keuren in San Diego, CA, was founded on the need to link homeless veterans to meaningful services and a tightly connected community in an environment that mirrors the safety of a move from the battlefield. This critical program has expanded across the country, with the National Coalition for Homeless Veterans (NCHV) serving as the base for its registered organizations. Now, events are hosted by more than 180 community partners each year to help homeless veterans reconnect to needed resources and community support.



For those familiar with Stand Down events, you likely know that veterans at Stand Down are connected to resources and referrals for services. However, Stand Down events, especially those led by community agencies, are much more than fairs offering a menu of services and referrals. These essential community interventions offer homeless veterans walking onto the grounds of Stand Down both a sense of community and a feeling of hope that has long been absent in their lives. Connectivity to service providers and agency representatives who give realistic, empathic support and community can mean the difference between an acceptance of assistance and further isolation.

Every community is unique, both in the resources it has and the veterans it serves, so every Stand Down event looks different. However, certain needs have remained consistent over time, and successful Stand Down events across the country will aim to meet these basic needs centered around housing, health care services, income/employment, legal assistance, and family services.

The CHALENG Report, published annually by the Department of Veterans Affairs, outlines the major unmet needs of homeless veterans across the country, as reported by the homeless veterans receiving services and the service providers who work with them. The 2015 Report gives us a snapshot of major unmet needs:

Top Ten Highest Unmet Needs, Female Veterans

Rank	Need	Mean Score
1	Registered Sex Offender Housing	2.02
2	Child Care	2.31
3	Family Reconciliation Assistance	2.47
4	Credit Counseling	2.48
5	Legal Assistance for Child Support Issues	2.49
6	Legal Assistance to Prevent Eviction and Foreclosure	2.51
7	Legal Assistance to Help Restore a Driver's License	2.52
8	Legal Assistance for Outstanding Warrants and Fines	2.52
9	Dental Care	2.53
10	Financial Guardianship	2.54

Top Ten Highest Unmet Needs, Male Veterans

Rank	Need	Mean Score
1	Registered Sex Offender Housing	2.04
2	Child Care	2.20
3	Legal Assistance to Prevent Eviction and Foreclosure	2.25
4	Legal Assistance for Child Support Issues	2.28
5	Legal Assistance to Help Restore a Driver's License	2.31
6	Family Reconciliation Assistance	2.33
7	Legal Assistance for Outstanding Warrants and Fines	2.33
8	Financial Guardianship	2.35
9	Discharge Upgrade	2.37
10	Financial Assistance to Prevent Eviction or Foreclosure	2.39

Often the first access points for veterans experiencing homelessness, Stand Downs were created to provide the services that match these unmet needs on the local level. From tangible goods—including sleeping bags, socks, personal care items and boots—to services—including haircuts, dental care, communication with family members and legal services—Stand Downs strive to connect veterans to essential items and services that are delivered by the people who know these veterans best: service providers in the community!

The NCHV TA Center has developed several resources to assist you as you develop, expand, or engage in a Stand Down event. You can learn more about the resources by contacting the NVTAC at hvrp@nchv.org. One of the resources we developed to support you provides guidance straight from the experts. We conducted interviews with Stand Down gurus from several agencies that either currently have HVRP funds and apply for Stand Down funds through DOL-VETS, or that work with local HVRP grantees to implement successful Stand Down events. These experts include the following agencies (you can read profiles on these agencies at the end of this guide):

- Goodwill Industries of Central Illinois
- Minnesota Assistance Council for Veterans (MACV)
- Ohio Valley Goodwill Industries
- Operation Stand Down Tennessee (OSDT)
- U.S. VETS
- Veterans First
- Veterans Village of San Diego (VVSD)

Advice from the Experts

Connecting to Income and Benefits

- We have a whole team who does benefits. Both our County VSOs and VA Regional Office do benefits processing. They also sign people up for e-benefits and verify veteran status online.
- We have several partners within the VSO community that help with VA benefits processing. AL, DAV, VVA, and VFW all come out to help with benefits. We also have the Social Security Administration and the IRS on site to help with other benefits and tax issues.

Identifying and Providing Housing Services

- Since we don't do an overnight, if the veterans do not have a place to go, we set them up with a place to stay and with travel options so they can get back to us.

- We have all local shelters, housing providers, Goodwill's Permanent Supportive Housing, and the VA HUD-VASH providers at the Stand Down.
- We try to have all housing providers in the area at the event, but with veterans in more rural areas, housing resources are often limited. We rely on the referral sources we do have that may be helpful.

Developing Community Buy-In

- Make sure you have buy-in from Veteran Service Organizations, VA Medical Center and Regional Office, the city elements (Mayor's Office, Housing service offices, Child Support enforcement agencies, Human service agencies), [and] various social service agencies.
- If possible, host your event at a large church in the area. Often, they would be honored to be involved, and they will have parking! You will be amazed at what the faith community can do for these veterans.



Removing Legal Barriers

- When the veteran is given a sentence of community service, the veteran is told which service providers he should visit at Stand Down. He gets a card which gets signed by the different providers. Judges enjoy it because they become part of the case management process and are doing something to benefit the veteran, not giving a free pass.
- Several years ago, we started homeless court at Stand Down after a hiatus of several years. We got everyone at the table two weeks before Stand Down, not knowing what we were doing, and we made it happen. It was chaos at first, but you just have to go for it.
- We have judges [at Stand Down] the whole time since we do not do pre-registration and we are never really sure who will come for services. The prosecuting attorneys in the biggest counties know about the event and that they will be getting calls throughout the day about people, and other counties know usually. The volunteering defense attorneys will bargain with the prosecutors and if the prosecutor cannot respond, the judge can make a decision and give the prosecutor a period of time to respond before the judgment stands.
- We have a paralegal that organizes the legal services. We usually have approximately 10 defense/prosecuting attorneys that take on cases pro-bono and work together to do plea deals.

Building a Community at Stand Down

- One aspect of our Stand Down that may not mean much to most people but our veterans are very appreciative of and we are proud of is that we provide a tented area with tables and chairs, with music playing throughout the day, and it's just for eating, enjoying the evening entertainment, announcements, opening and closing ceremonies. These veterans and their families most of the time eat standing up, on the ground or on a park bench. It's really nice for them to enjoy the comforts of shade and to be able to go sit at a table with new and old friends, have a soft drink, a snack, talk, play table games, or just read.
- Have internet onsite if you can. This can be a challenge for an outdoor event, so think of having a 'hub.'
- Surveys have been helpful because we learned that our signage was bad. We had aisles in the indoor section where the flow of traffic was going behind where the service providers were seated, and one of the

providers had PTSD and was uncomfortable with that set up. So we fixed that. I don't know all of the areas of improvement, so this helps.

Getting Creative about Community Resources

- We decided, in coordination with the VA staff, that we would not do pre-registration. Instead, if the veteran does not have a DD214 or ID, the VA staff or Stand Down staff members can look up the veteran's social security number (SSN) to verify veteran status and begin the benefits processing on site.
- The Rotary has a moving library on wheels. The bookshelves came in with a lending library, so veterans can take or return the books throughout Stand Down. Instead of having books donated, this allows the veterans to read throughout the event or take books with them, and at the end, the partner takes the entire set-up with them. This is much easier than coordinating book donations.
- We are able to offer massage, acupuncture, and alternative medicine, and these are very popular. For us, finding the person in the community who is equipped and dedicated is the hard part because they must be certified. Sometimes, however, we can use schools and students for these services when they are coordinated by the certified provider.
- Watch for liability issues: you **MUST** have security. Security teams of formerly homeless veterans may be more patient!

Get to Know the Experts

The experts interviewed for this guide have over 100 YEARS of collective Stand Down experience. Here is a little more information about how they got started with Stand Down events:

Goodwill Industries of Central Illinois

We have participated in several Stand Downs and have helped groups to develop "mini-Stand Downs" where they are needed. We used the HVRP grant to support Stand Down for the first three years when it was an allowable inclusion in the grant. The support we receive allows us to put on an outstanding Stand Down that benefits more than 120 homeless veterans.

Minnesota Assistance Council for Veterans (MACV)

We have been a part of Stand Down for 20 years and have been organizing the main Minneapolis Stand Down for seven years. When we started, we did not receive guidance. We took over the event and have a few records of how it was done, but we really started from scratch. Because of our experience, we have been able to offer guidance to other Stand Downs in MACV. Now, we all work together to improve all of our Stand Downs. While we have no formal major committee, we have different subcommittees for different sectors of services. We always survey the participants and providers to get feedback on the event. Our goal and the philosophy is to reach as many veterans with as many good services as possible.

Ohio Valley Goodwill Industries

In the early days, starting in 1994, we used Stand Down to bring the homeless veterans in an area into contact with the VA and agencies that could help them. That seemed to work fairly well. We fed them, clothed them, and did what we could to get them into services. Using this approach, we did some real good for these veterans. We are seeing mainly veterans who are already in the system: those with a HUD-VASH voucher, those in a GPD program, or those who are already working with several teams at the VA. It changes how our Stand Down works and the priorities we make in working with veterans.

Operation Stand Down Tennessee

We have participated in Stand Down for over 20 years. In 1992, VVSD came to Nashville, TN and presented on the concept of Stand Down. Now, we have provided support and guidance to many events in the intervening

years. Stand Down funds were part of our HVRP grant until 2012, when we applied for the DOL-VETS funding separately. The Annual OSD Event has grown over the last 20 years so that there are now 135 organizations providing support, with 42 social service agencies. Any type of service a veteran needs or wants is there for services and discussions with the veterans.

U.S. VETS

When we first started, we researched several Stand Downs and asked many questions. After we did this research, we monitored our Stand Downs to identify what needs were not being met and adjusted to cover them in future years as much as possible. Over the past few years, we have received several phone calls and emails requesting help from other organizations, and we have provided suggestions, offered assistance and recommended that they visit our Stand Down events or others closer to them to learn from others in the field.

Veterans First

When we first started, we received guidance from [VVSD in] San Diego. We have offered guidance to Ventura County and San Gabriel Valley. To get organized, we contacted all county government agencies, the VA, veteran and service organizations and nonprofit service providers. We started nine months in advance and held monthly meetings. In the last six weeks we held the meetings every two weeks. We always keep a strict time schedule since many of the providers were government and only had their lunch hour to be there.

Veterans Village of San Diego (VVSD)

VVSD started Stand Down over 25 years ago, and since then has provided guidance to over 30 other Stand Downs. These organizations need varied levels of assistance, and VVSD is able to provide guidance, whether the program needs a few consultations or step-by-step assistance from start to finish. We emphasize that the most important goal for Stand Down must be establishing consistency. The homeless veterans are aware of that, so they expect that. To keep it from becoming too big, we assign all tables in advance and standardize our process. This makes all providers equal and keeps the event about the veteran.

