



The Drive to December

NCHV Veterans Access to Housing Summit Wrap-Up Report
December 2015

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Background on the NCHV Veterans Access to Housing Summit

The National Coalition for Homeless Veterans (NCHV) Veterans Access to Housing Summit brings together impactful partners across institutions to create real, new housing opportunities for veterans. It is the nation's only forum offering several intimate opportunities for engagement with the hardworking partners who oversee and manage Federal grant programs related to veteran and affordable housing. We help local agencies join Federal programs with resources from major financial institutions and corporate philanthropy partners, with a specific focus on The Home Depot Foundation and Citi Community Development. At the Summit, we connect the dots between the major affordable housing partners serving vulnerable veterans.

The *Drive to December*, the theme of the 2015 Summit, encapsulated an urgent effort to combat significant challenges and strive hard toward our goal of ending veteran homelessness in every community with a stable functional zero system. This effort was especially critical this year:

- We face a serious affordable housing crisis as rents continue to rise, rental demand has skyrocketed, and tax credits that protected affordable housing begin to expire in many high-cost communities;
- Federal funding for financial bridges out of homelessness for homeless and at risk veterans reached an all-time high; and
- Community level expertise among NCHV Member agencies and partners offers depth and knowledge to maximize available opportunities.

We challenged community organizations to build upon the foundation set in previous years while bulldozing through the barriers that remain in the *Drive to December*. An exclusive group of 230 leaders in the affordable housing and homeless services community converged for two days of intensive training and facilitated trouble-shooting to identify new opportunities to maximize affordable housing for homeless and low income veterans.

This Summit provided these organizations with unprecedented access to a faculty of experts on affordable housing development, access, and stability. These experts came from the HUD, VA, DOL, and USICH, from NCHV's partners in philanthropy and across financial institutions, from NCHV's training and technical assistance partners, and from peer agencies across the country that have made real change in their communities and in the lives of veterans.

During the Opening Session of the Housing Summit, participants heard directly from Secretary of Housing and Urban Development Castro and VHA Homeless Programs lead Lisa Pape on how the Federal government is building wrap-around systems of care to help community agencies support homeless and at risk veterans in local communities. We were honored to be joined by USICH Executive Director, Matthew Doherty, who outlined the recently released Federal benchmarks and criteria for ending veteran homelessness. The benchmarks, as outlined by Doherty, provide a framework and baseline for community agencies to evaluate their progress toward reaching a functional end to veteran homelessness. These benchmarks and criteria help communities work with their Federal partners to secure Federal approval of their functional zero declaration. They heard from the White House, who sent Joining Forces Executive Director Nicole Malachowski to share how Joining Forces is engaging businesses and landlords. For the first time, community providers were given front-line access to the developers of the Federal benchmarks and criteria for assessing a community's functional zero system. NCHV shared the stage with our major financial institution partner, Citi Community Development and Citi Community Capital, and our partner in affordable housing development, The Home Depot Foundation, to discuss progress made to date, the road ahead, and gearing up to develop new units for veterans in need.

The community agency representatives then had the opportunity to engage with and learn from one another through a series of facilitated round-robin and small group discussions. These discussions offered peer-to-peer agency mentorship, one-on-one discussions with major technical assistance partners, and resources on employment and benefits services to support housing stability. All participants were given the opportunity to ask specific questions of the Federal agency leaders of all major veteran homelessness housing programs, including GPD, SSVF, HUD-VASH, the CoC, and PHAs.

A Profile of Summit Participants

This year, registration sold out faster than in any previous year; we reached full capacity nearly a month before the event. Importantly, organizations sent top leadership, including either agency leads or the leads of major housing programs within the agencies, which were able to make concrete, actionable decisions to improve housing opportunities back in their communities.

A summary of participants in the Summit is as follows:

Executive Director/CEO/President (i.e. Agency/Company lead)	16.33%
Chief Financial Officer/Grant Writer	0.00%
Operations/Program Director	46.94%
Case Manager/Social Worker	24.49%
VSO representative	0.00%
Housing Developer	2.04%
National organization representative	4.08%
Federal Agency representative (i.e. VACO, HUD, DOL)	4.08%
State or Local Agency representative (i.e. VA Medical Center, HUD Field office)	2.04%
Mayor or other elected official	0.00%

Participants were overwhelmingly members of NCHV's network; sixty-eight percent of participants worked for NCHV Member agencies. While many participants have gone to more than one Housing Summit (33 percent), over 60 percent were participating in the Housing Summit for the first time.

When asked what brought them to the Housing Summit, participants focused in on the importance of learning from their national partners and from one another. In ranked order, participants ranked these seven statements as their primary reason for attending the Housing Summit:

- To learn about new and emerging best practices
- To hear from national leaders from VA, HUD, and DOL
- To network with new partners
- To see and speak to partners with whom I have a longstanding relationship
- To learn about advocacy and meet with my Congressional Representatives
- To meet potential funders for my programs
- To learn more about being a part of the NCHV coalition of service agencies

What We Learned

The Housing Summit revealed several immediate next steps and insights into local strategies for major impact. Three major take-aways from the Housing Summit included:

1. GPD needs to be at the table in all local community planning: We heard considerable miscommunication about GPD and its role in the functional zero system. GPD is not disappearing, but funding may decrease if we do not advocate for maintenance of current funding levels. Veterans choosing long-term service intensive transitional housing will not count against communities pursuing approval of their functional zero system, but GPD programs must still be involved in local planning and coordination of intake and referral processes. GPD programs do not have to convert to permanent housing, and in fact many cannot do so because of the limitations of their contract terms if they received grant funding. GPD programs are not required to change their service model, but they should adapt their Scope of Work to reflect the spectrum of transitional housing services they provide to meet local need. This revised scope could include “bridge housing” or “service intensive” transitional housing options with varied length of stay, with a focus on decreasing the time from homeless to housed. These are activities GPD programs are likely already doing; capturing them in an updated Scope of Work would quantify permanent housing placement and length of stay when the GPD program is given a reboot and existing programs have to reapply for funding. We do not have all of the answers yet for how GPD and SSVF can and should work together, but the creativity of solutions comes from local communities.

2. Measurement of systems is critical to reaching our goals: The Federal benchmarks provided by USICH during the Housing Summit showed a deep understanding of the needs of homeless veterans and the local community providers that serve them. These benchmarks hone in on system stability and capacity: systems must function before, during, and after any day when a city declares a functional end to veteran homelessness. Systems must be ready to support veterans at risk of homelessness and to ensure stability for those placed into permanent housing.

3. Engaging landlords is still a significant challenge: While many communities can help veterans quickly lease-up with HUD-VASH, not all of these vouchers are connected to a leased-up unit, with the main hurdle being available landlords willing to accept a HUD-VASH voucher. Communities can push for increased numbers of HUD-VASH units to be project based to spur new affordable housing development. This would be especially helpful in high-cost markets where Low Income Housing Tax Credit expirations have led to decreasing numbers of affordable units right when they are needed. Public Housing Authorities are often willing to help engage landlords, but they need the help of local community agencies. PHAs can utilize Extraordinary Administrative Fees and provide set-asides without managing their own separate veterans list if a by-name list of veterans needing vouchers is already available through the CoC or community planning lead agency.

4. Successful long-term system stability requires investment in supportive services: In many communities, HUD-VASH case management is not enough to ensure veterans who move into housing do not return to homelessness within a few years. A functioning system in the future requires that we do the right work now to ensure veterans are stabilized, not re-institutionalized, in housing with services to keep them engaged and to improve their quality of life. This means HUD-VASH case manager hiring should continue to be expedited, but also that case management services should be contracted out to capable and willing community agencies with a record of working with this challenging population of chronically homeless, high-need veterans. It also means we need employment programs to be at the table so veterans have access to employment services even after they move into housing.

What the Issue Experts and Participants Had to Say

This year, for the first time ever, NCHV was joined by every major partner in the effort to end veteran homelessness, representing a solid multi-institution training faculty. This faculty included several program leads and top leadership of the VA homeless programs office, several representatives from HUD's national office working on veteran housing programs, several representatives from USICH, and the major training and technical assistance partners working on the varied initiatives to end veteran homelessness and maximize affordable housing opportunities. NCHV was honored by the high level of commitment from our partners: every invited issue expert was able to participate, showing unprecedented buy-in across fields.

In a post-event survey, the large majority of participants expressed overwhelmingly positive feedback on the working sessions and their interactions with these issue experts. In fact, many expressed their desire to participate in future NCHV events, including the Annual Conference and the 2016 Veterans Access to Housing Summit. Some general comments from participants about the Housing Summit included:

- *"I feel like anyone interested in achieving the goal of ending Veteran homelessness by 2016 should have attended this meeting."*
- *"I was really happy to see that these representatives are collaborating!"*
- *"I so appreciate the invitation to join this year's Housing Summit. There was an amazing energy to the group and eagerness to tackle the 'hard stuff' that we are encountering as we get to functional zero! Thanks so much to the NCHV staff for all of your hard work in putting this together!"*
- *"Thank you to the leadership in being so involved and providing their perspective."*

These issue experts and participants shared several critical insights into the effort to maximize housing outcomes for homeless veterans. Summaries of the issue expert take-aways and participants comments include:

We need to get creative with landlord engagement strategies: The issue experts provided a series of creative strategies for engaging landlords to open up new affordable housing capacity. Master lease arrangements were described in detail as an expedient way to bring housing online. Importantly, these master leases can reflect multiple models depending on local need and provider ability, including provider lessees or intermediary lessees held by local government agencies. Master leases can be held for entire buildings or portions of various facilities. Experts encouraged participants to seek out distressed or under-utilized properties because owners may find master lease arrangements an attractive lease-up option. Master leasing can also be a stepping stone for agencies interested in building their housing capacity and expertise. For more experienced agencies, master leases can be used as temporary housing options while new facilities are being constructed.

Participant comments included:

- *"I found it to be useful to speak with other agencies that have the same interest and innovations."*
- *"Master leases are a great way to ensure housing for Veterans."*
- *"Outreach tools for recruiting and sustaining landlords who will rent."*
- *"Landlord engagement is a vital part of the rapid rehousing process. It is important to establish relationships with local landlords."*
- *"I remember learning that it was okay to talk to my mayor and the best, most efficient conversation to have with him/her. I learned that it's okay to talk to our congressman too and how to go about meeting with them. I learned that they are approachable and was told they want to be involved."*
- *"Some very good information on Landlord engagement. Talking with other organizations on what they do to improve landlord relations was very helpful."*
- *"That many rural communities nationwide were experiencing a shortage of housing units. That some local agencies were perhaps being a bit to strict with interpreting who and how we can help with the SSVF program. The importance of landlord relationships. The specific criteria for functional zero."*

- *“The most valuable was engaging our Mayor - who is committed in San Francisco. We want to keep him engaged beyond 2016! Landlord engagement was a very insightful session. SF is a tight housing market and we struggle with this so many good ideas were shared by the group.”*

- *“Landlord engagement best practices. Ideas to get the community more involved. A landlord database”*

To build and sustain affordable housing, we need to think beyond VA: Experts noted that while VA may have vacant or underutilized buildings, providers should carefully consider the property’s location, cost to rehabilitate, population to be served, and availability of adequate funding sources to make the property a viable housing option for veterans. Experts encouraged participants to explore Low Income Housing Tax Credits (LIHTCs), which have consistently been an important resource for financing long term housing. Experts acknowledged that creating new units is sometimes sidelined because of the need for capital financing and project-based subsidies to cover resident rental costs and service needs, especially for aging veterans. In rural areas, providers can tap into USDA Rural Development community facilities loans and grants. Many providers have benefited from the Community Impact Grant Program and the Veteran Housing Grants Program. Also, the Team Depot Grant Program is a passion-driven program that pays for the materials and supplies that a Team Depot needs to take on a volunteer friendly project; experts encouraged participants to reach out to local Home Depot stores to gauge interest and match skill sets to projects.

Participant comments included:

- *“The discussion was incredibly thought provoking about how we can use Medicaid to pay for supportive services in housing and fully utilize this funding stream. My major takeaway was that we need to partner with USICH to develop more tools to break down this complicated policy into clear action steps for the SOAR community.”*

- *“I learned some creative ways to house veterans that are not national practice. I was able to network with some developers and financiers for some ideas I have of how to help eliminate the national affordable housing crisis.”*

- *“Home Depot takes personally the responsibility of taking care of Vets.”*

- *“The most valuable time spent was with Home Depot as we have a number of aging veterans and retrofitting buildings is a must.”*

- *“The Home Depot talk... provided a better understanding of how creative organizations can be in supporting properties in committing to helping Veterans with housing.”*

- *“I am from a rural area and it seems that most of the programs are in large cities with more shelter options.”*

Connecting income interventions to housing programs can maximize long-term stability: SOAR seeks to end homelessness through increased access to SSI/SSDI income supports, resulting in greater housing stability for individuals with disabling conditions. When providers use the SSI/SSDI Outreach, Access, and Recovery (SOAR) model to assist applicants, national approval rates are 65 percent, with the top 10 states achieving an average approval rate of 82 percent, and with decisions reached in approximately 94 days. Expedited benefits processing can complement housing first services: there are two SSA fast-track programs to expedite application processing for Veterans who meet certain eligibility. Each state has a SOAR TA Center Liaison who assists with implementing and growing the SOAR initiative, and most states have a State SOAR Lead who is located within the state.

Participant comments included:

- *“Income stability is a key role in housing stability.”*

- *“The continued need to keep a focus on engaging local employers and building relationships that will help veterans get jobs in the future.”*

- *“We spent quite a bit of time talking about community resources dedicated to helping the homeless veteran achieve employment - I was surprised at the number of providers that are not actively accessing AJC services.”*

- *“I learned about how to leverage the DVOP’s role in housing veterans and keeping them housed. That is one other missing piece to this housing crisis our nation faces. In fact, that begins the prevention piece that the government doesn’t seem to be ready to tackle.”*

- *“SOAR was very helpful and helped me to identify ways to help the process go smoother and have better success with initial applications.”*

- *“Money management was also helpful as many of our clients need assistance in this area.”*

We need to maximize the effectiveness of HUD-VASH: Experts from across disciplines reported a consistent message from community agencies regarding HUD-VASH case management: VA’s efforts to ramp up hiring of case managers has had a profound impact, but communities still struggle with insufficient case management that hampers their ability to fully lease up and manage the service needs of veterans with HUD-VASH vouchers.

Participant comments included:

- *“The emerging focus on creating a peer to peer type case management and using shared experiences to help relate to and motivate veterans.”*
- *“The housing first [table] was also useful because it highlights emerging best practices and underscore the need for this process to be veteran orientated rather than process orientated.”*
- *“The learning of VASH plan for the tribal lands that will be active in the future. This is of interest, because there is a significant amount of tribal lands in our area.”*
- *“It was exciting to hear about ... developing legislation for HVRP to increase eligibility to those in HUD-VASH. I’m also interested in the increasing focus on elderly Veterans, as this is an area that we don’t currently address, but should touch on.”*

Collaboration is happening, but we need to keep breaking down silos: The presence of so many experts showcased a profound commitment to getting the job done and fighting for the same team. However, silos still exist when information is not shared regularly between major stakeholders. Experts can provide local partners with the tools to better integrate housing, supportive service, and employment programs to ensure a wrap-around, client centered approach to care for every veteran seeking services. What we learn from ending veteran homelessness will feed into the work being done to end homelessness for other populations. Insights gained by changing programs within HUD can be applied to system coordination within VA.

Participant comments included:

- *“There were a lot of well articulated statements regarding the future of SSVF, HUD/VASH, and references to supportive housing.”*
- *“Appreciated the federal partner openness.”*
- *“It was really nice to put a name to the face in this session. It was also helpful to know that the agencies really do understand the changes we are going through and are taking the appropriate steps to help accommodate our Vets.”*
- *“[Major take away was] certification requirements for USICH.”*
- *“I learned that agency leaders were a little surprised about what the disappointments and struggles were in the field. Specifically, the frustrations in dealing with untimely payments and paperwork from the PHA. I’m hoping this will make a difference in how they audit or monitor agencies on a local level.”*
- *“The major take away was I learned that many of the SSVF providers are not in the loop regarding AJCs. They really need to be educated on the services provided.”*

Local coordination requires consistent time investment: Experts emphasized the importance of facilitating regular communication between local leaders to address conflicts and build buy-in around coordinated systems. Experts suggested aiming for weekly in-person meetings to create a natural setting where organizations can meet and discuss challenges and share best practices.

Participant comments included:

- *“The participants were given more insight to where they need to go when they encounter a problem and other options they may have not thought of before this summit.”*
- *“My take away was that there is a TON more flexibility at the top than local communities are aware of. And local communities need to be empowered to think progressively.”*
- *“Was important to hear from the higher levels of what challenges they see that programs as a whole are dealing with and what maybe coming in the future for our programs.”*

Success on the local level requires co-located and coordinated SSVF and GPD: Integrating GPD with SSVF to help veterans maximize stability as quickly as possible was a key theme identified throughout the Summit. Issue experts suggested that agencies with co-located programs support on-site screening for both programs for all veterans going through intake and co-location of SSVF managers at GPD sites to improve cooperation.

Participant comments included:

- *“I was able to learn a great deal of information about GPD; this is a new program for us and the info was very helpful.”*
- *“Most are still trying to find the best use of GPD and trying to phase out transitional housing to help veterans into more permanent housing faster.”*
- *“Transitioning veterans to permanent housing from GPD using SSVF. This group help underscore the need for partners to work together and be on the same page when it comes to identifying vets to using the continuum of care to make the transition quicker. The landlord engagement group also provided ideas about ways to engage and retain landlords in an area with very [high] occupancy rates.”*
- *“I really enjoyed learning about how others are running their similar programs and was able to take away some ideas from these groups. I enjoyed exploring how to collaborate with SSVF and GPD to better serve our clients and also about creating Tracks for our clients within the GPD program. It was also nice to speak to providers who are experiencing the same changes and challenges with this population.”*
- *“In this session there was a lot of talk about GPD and transitional housing.... The issue is a lack of affordable housing and rental companies, as well as apartment complexes, that are willing to take subsidy funding to aid veterans with rent.”*
- *“We are in the process of changing our GPD Programs to better fit with national goals.”*
- *“The major take away [from the Federal partners session] was to confirm there will be changes occurring and possible ways to prepare.”*

Where We Go From Here: NCHV Recommendations

Over the course of the Housing Summit and in subsequent follow-up from this training event, the NCHV team identified several immediate next steps needed to ensure veterans experiencing and at risk of homelessness have access to appropriate and sustainable housing options. Major next steps for training and advocacy include:

RECOMMENDATION ONE: Improve and implement coordinated intake processes: Although many communities have developed a thriving coordinated intake process, other communities are struggling to choose tools, set up frameworks, and institute a consistent process. Fortunately, networking opportunities at the Housing Summit helped many participants connect to the experts and community partners who have faced and overcome these hurdles. This peer mentorship, sharing of best practices, and continued training will be essential moving forward.

RECOMMENDATION TWO: Build peer mentorship programs to maximize resources: Participants at the Housing Summit brought up the important role that peer mentors can play in shepherding veterans through the service delivery system from outreach to placement. This peer model has been implemented in several communities to help veterans navigate an otherwise complicated system. This replicable model can be scaled up with enhanced education on how to implement it locally.

RECOMMENDATION THREE: Scale up emerging models that make core programs work together: Although several agencies are working to integrate local SSVF and GPD programs, this process still needs considerable work to ensure veterans are accessing the resources that best match their needs and their choice. Participants shared creative efforts to integrate SSVF, GPD, HVRP, and HUD-VASH to best meet the unique needs of local veterans. Several participants identified the importance of utilizing GPD capacity effectively to maximize permanent housing outcomes, especially for those veterans who do not receive a HUD-VASH voucher. The Housing Summit was an important step in better coordinating these programs. Going forward, future training events need to identify best practices around integration.

RECOMMENDATION FOUR: Connect local resources using local partners: Participants shared their challenges in connecting the dots locally. Sometimes, facilitating buy-in from community partners presented the largest hurdles, especially when community agency partners were unfamiliar with the eligibility, service restrictions, or rules of specific grants and programs. In other cases, the local challenge came from a less than adequate connection between homeless service agencies and other partners, including disability and employment service programs. Regular communication through weekly or bi-weekly meetings opens up a better understanding of how programs can integrate. We need additional training and on the ground involvement using peer mentor agencies to help spread this best practice and to help local planning teams decide on a coordinated intake tool to be used by all community providers.

RECOMMENDATION FIVE: Map out the next steps to create more housing: Participants described several obstacles they are currently facing in their local efforts to increase housing capacity. While many participants have considerable experience helping homeless veterans, only a limited number of experts have expertise in developing long-term or permanent supportive housing options. Participants expressed a consistent curiosity about development schedules, capital financing structures, cash flows, and site identification. Continued education on these processes was identified as a high need.

RECOMMENDATION SIX: Leverage non-traditional housing resources: Participants had creative solutions for opening up new housing options. Some participants suggested pushing VA and DoD to partner to use DoD land for veteran housing. Others brought up private land that could be turned into permanent housing in high-cost areas. Some participants engage landlord by renovating landlord properties to help build buy-in to work with the agency and provide housing to homeless veterans, with and without HUD-VASH. Again, education on financing structures, schedules, and availability of construction and rehabilitation capital were brought up repeatedly as barriers to successful execution of these plans.

RECOMMENDATION SEVEN: Match Employment First with Housing First: Participants repeatedly debunked the myth that veterans who are seeking supportive housing or benefits are always unable or unwilling to return to work. In fact, several participants expressed strong support for improved coordination between employment programs and housing agencies and emphasized the need for financial education programs for veterans and their families. Providers, especially those with limited internal expertise on employment and training models and programs, need additional training on employment interventions and benefits processing to help expedite integration of these processes into housing stability planning efforts.

The Drive to December: NCHV Veterans Access to Housing Summit Expert Panelists

Federal Program Coordination and Integration

Matthew Doherty: U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness

Marcy Thompson and Molly Allen: Department of Housing and Urban Development

Lisa Pape, Anthony Love, Bob Hallett, Keith Harris, John Kuhn, Jeff Quarles, and Jesse Vazzano: Department of Veterans Affairs

Tom O'Toole: National Center on Homelessness Among Veterans

Steve Berg: National Alliance to End Homelessness

Baylee Crone: National Coalition for Homeless Veterans

Group 1: Local Experts and Best Practices to Foster Stability

Steve Peck and Darryl Vincent: U.S. VETS

Kristine DiNardo: New England Center for Homeless Veterans

Emmy Hildebrand and Cindy Thomas: Hoosier Veterans Assistance Foundation

Emma Anderson: VOA Colorado

Jim Zenner: VOA Greater Los Angeles

Leon Winston: Swords to Plowshares

Matthew Leslie: Virginia Veteran and Family Support

Kally Canfield and Dominga Helgesson: Friendship Place

Group 2: National Initiatives, Local Impact

Leslie Wise and Jessica Marcus: Community Solutions

Joshua Stewart: National Coalition for Homeless Veterans

Richard Cho: U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness

Jennifer Ho: Department of Housing and Urban Development

Elisha Harig-Blaine: National League of Cities

Tom Albanese: Abt. Associates

Doug Tetrault: TAC

David Bridges: Pathways to Housing DC

Group 3: What Comes Next? Long-Term Housing Creation

Paul McPherson: Department of Veterans Affairs

Joe Wimberley: The Home Depot Foundation

Norm Suchar, Marcy Thompson, and Carrie Schuettepelz: Department of Housing and Urban Development

Jim Yates: TAC

Joe Belden: Housing Assistance Council

Kristen Grifka: U.S. Department of Agriculture

Pat Sheridan: Volunteers of America

Hilary Gawrilow and Nancy Mercer: Corporation for Supportive Housing

Group 4: Income's Role in Housing Stability

Ken Fenner, Shirley Snyder, and Francheska Atchison: Department of Labor

Cindy Borden: National Coalition for Homeless Veterans

Jen Elder: PRA

Mark Walker: The American Legion

Paul Varela: Disabled American Veterans

Mark Godfrey: Clear Point

Terry Hughes: National Veterans Training Institute

Peter Nicewicz: U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness