



## STRATEGIC PLAN: EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



In 2009, President Obama and VA Secretary Eric Shinseki announced the goal of ending homelessness among veterans by 2015. This plan aims to achieve that goal in Connecticut — to ensure that most veterans in our state are prevented from ever losing their housing, and that those that temporarily find themselves without a place to live are caught by a responsive and efficient safety net and returned to a stable home within six weeks. The challenge will be considerable. However, we believe we can achieve this goal by 2015 — in line with federal targets and two years ahead of the Opening Doors-CT deadline — and we are committed to doing so.

The most recent point-in-time count found roughly 400 homeless veterans on a single night in Connecticut. While 400 homeless veterans is 400 too many, the challenge ahead is a surmountable one. Thanks to considerable investments from the federal government and the commitment of dozens of leading local stakeholders, Connecticut's homeless veteran population is on the decline. We do not need to create vast new programs, but rather to enhance coordination among existing resources and to fill gaps where they occur. This report outlines a series of specific and actionable steps we can and must take to make the final push in Connecticut, bringing our state's homeless veteran population to zero.

Fully implemented, these recommendations will ensure that veterans in need will be able to find their way to the major homelessness programs, that those programs quickly and efficiently serve their clients, and that robust employment programs are readily available on the back end to transition veterans to full recovery and independence.

## 1. HOUSING

Our housing recommendations center on increasing the efficiency and improving the targeting of the two major federal programs for homeless veterans: HUD-Veterans Affairs Supportive Housing (HUD-VASH), a robust supportive housing program for veterans with high needs, and Supportive Services for Veteran Families (SSVF), a homelessness prevention and rapid re-housing program implemented by five non-profit grantees across the state. For HUD-VASH, we recommend several policies to overcome logistical obstacles

and to ensure that veterans can move from homelessness to a HUD-VASH-sponsored unit in six weeks or less, including:

- Create a **revolving loan fund to provide security deposits** for veterans entering the program
- Enlist greater support in the lease-up process by creating a formal **role for community-based case managers** at shelters and other non-VA agencies
- Educate case managers and public housing authorities on the **program's documentation requirements**, which are less stringent than commonly believed
- Push for an **exemption to the VA's restrictive regulations on intakes**, allowing outreach by peers throughout the state
- Use this streamlined process to also provide **referrals to non-VA veterans housing**

For SSVF, we recommend convening regular meetings of the various providers so as to:

- Design and implement **a coordinated outreach campaign** that eliminates duplication of efforts and comprehensively reaches Connecticut's veterans
- Ensure **common policies in interacting with other veterans programs**, especially at VA, and **strategically align SSVF with other temporary assistance programs**

We also recommend several policies to inexpensively increase capacity and improve outcomes in transitional and permanent housing:

- **Promote transitions to full independence from HUD-VASH and transitional housing**, by changing the program culture and overcoming economic, social, and psychological barriers — increasing turnover and functionally expanding the housing stock
- Create more permanent housing for veterans by **converting unused state property**
- Enhance existing **connections between the state veterans home at Rocky Hill and mainstream homelessness providers**, ensuring that Rocky Hill's veterans have the necessary supports they need to achieve independence
- Work with the Department of Corrections to **create a veterans-specific halfway house**, guaranteeing effective re-entry transitions for justice-involved veterans

## 2. EMPLOYMENT

Because long-term positive outcomes in this effort rely on veterans achieving financial independence, we recommend several initiatives to guarantee homeless and at-risk veterans access to stable, rewarding jobs. Principally, we aim to ensure robust employment services are readily available to every veteran experiencing homelessness or in a housing program:

- Create a Veterans Opportunity Fund that agencies can access for seed capital **to hire additional IPS-model employment specialists** serving homeless veterans
- Hire a **Veteran Employment Coordinator jointly reporting to DOL and VA** to oversee the network of employment specialists and job developers working with veterans across the state, facilitating referrals and ensuring quality services

Several other recommendations support this principal strategy:

- Organize a **network of veteran employers** who commit to hiring and supporting homeless or at-risk veterans, and facilitating their transition to the private sector
- **Streamline the resources available to business owners who hire veterans**, selecting a short list of critical, endorsed opportunities and disseminating it online and in print
- Produce a **one-page brief that veterans can bring to job interviews**, detailing hiring incentives and mythbusters about the liability of hiring National Guard members and reservists
- Support existing efforts to automatically **transfer military occupational certifications to the private sector**

### 3. OUTREACH

All of our work is premised on getting homeless veterans connected to the right services. There are two primary logical front doors to the system — VA Connecticut and the several SSVF providers — and we focus on ensuring that veterans reach one of these agencies.

Our principal outreach initiative is designed to comprehensively refer veterans from shelters and transitional housing:

- Distribute **simple, user-friendly referral information sheets** to all shelters and outreach teams, directing case managers to refer veterans to the VA and SSVF
- Use the **Homeless Management Information System (HMIS) database to promote referrals** by: (1) Creating an automatic notification system that alerts VA and SSVF providers when a veteran enters a shelter or other HMIS agency, and (2) Sending periodic lists of homeless veterans' names from HMIS to VA and SSVF providers

In addition to this principal strategy, other efforts include:

- Promote **referrals from within the National Guard** by distributing user-friendly referral information sheets to officers at the company level
- Organize **tours of key mental health and housing service sites for platoon sergeants** in the National Guard, to promote understanding of services, reduce stigma of mental health issues, and drive informed referrals
- Convene a committee of experts to **review and triage the veterans resource list** maintained by 211 Infoline
- Monitor the **pilot colocation of veterans services** at the VA Errera Center as a potential model for the rest of the state

### 4. OTHER

Several other recommendations address other relevant issues for homeless and at-risk veterans:

- Create a discretionary fund — potentially using existing state resources — that case managers can access to **cover transportation costs** (i.e. bus passes or gas)
- Hold **trainings for VSOs filing veteran disability claims** to increase the percentage of claims that are fully developed, shortening veterans' wait for benefit payments

## Strategic Plan on Veteran Homelessness – Executive Summary – November 2013

- Ensure that veterans seeking mental health services are **not discouraged from accessing DMHAS services**, especially in areas far from the main VA service centers
- Improve **capacity of university Oasis centers** to identify and serve at-risk veterans
- Provide **free DMV IDs** for homeless or at-risk veterans

Taken together, these steps will take us where we need to go to end homelessness among veterans in our state by 2015. It is a daunting task, but an achievable one. We believe that we owe it to those who have served and sacrificed for us to follow through.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This report is the result of six months of research, brainstorming, analysis, and deliberation by the Veterans Workgroup of Opening Doors-CT. We wish to thank the following very busy professionals for their time, wisdom, and dedication to the Workgroup, making this work possible:

**Brian Baker** (South Park Inn), **Joyce Barclay** (Workplace, Inc.), **Greg Behrman** (CT Heroes Project), **Joseph Carbone** (Workplace, Inc.), **Maria Cheney** (CT Department of Veterans Affairs), **Justine Couveras** (Chrysalis Center), **Betsy Crum** (Connecticut Housing Coalition), **Alison Cunningham** (Columbus House), **Anthony Gagnon** (veteran), **Barbara Geller** (CT Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services), **Daniela Giordano** (National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) Connecticut), **Kristen Granatek** (Connecticut Coalition to End Homelessness), **Nichole Guerra** (Partnership for Strong Communities), **Mike Hanley** (Partnership for Strong Communities), **Laurie Harkness** (VA Connecticut Errera Community Care Center), **Theddeus Iheanacho** (VA Connecticut Errera Community Care Center), **Andy James** (CT Department of Labor), **Steve Jensen** (Office of the Lieutenant Governor), **EJ Johnson** (VA Connecticut Errera Community Care Center), **Aaron Jones** (South Park Inn), **Anne Klee** (VA Connecticut Errera Community Care Center), **Chuck Leone** (CT Department of Veterans Affairs), **Christopher McCluskey** (Community Renewal Team), **Jessica Marshall** (VA Connecticut Errera Community Care Center), **Daniel McHale** (Army), **Doreen Mercado** (CT Department of Labor), **Alice Minervino** (CT Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services), **Nicholas Montini** (VA Connecticut Errera Community Care Center), **Tina Ortiz** (Community Renewal Team), **Howard Rifkin** (Partnership for Strong Communities), **David Rosenthal** (VA Connecticut Errera Community Care Center), **Linda Schwartz** (CT Department of Veterans Affairs), **Juliet Taylor** (VA Connecticut Errera Community Care Center), **Michael Thomas** (Subway), **Alicia Woodsby** (Partnership for Strong Communities), **Gabriel Zucker** (CT Heroes Project), **Sarah Zucker** (Connecticut Coalition to End Homelessness)

Valuable input was also provided by:

**Matthew Abbott** (VA Connecticut Errera Community Care Center), **Lisa Bahadosingh** (Supportive Housing Works), **Peter Baird** (MDRC), **Patrice Boyce** (VA Connecticut Errera Community Care Center), **Edward Breton** (CT Department of Veterans Affairs), **Letticia Brown-Gambino** (Columbus House), **Tom Byrne** (National Center on Homelessness Among Veterans), **John Chiechi** (VA Connecticut Errera Community Care Center), **Jason Coppola** (CT Department of Labor), **Dennis Culhane** (National Center on Homelessness Among Veterans), **Kellyann Day** (New Haven Home Recovery), **Debbie Deegan** (VA Connecticut Errera Community Care Center), **John Dunne** (Corporation for Supportive Housing), **Sarah Gallagher** (Corporation for Supportive Housing), **Erin Healy** (Community Solutions), **Marie Johnson** (Shelter for the Homeless), **Gabor Kautzner** (West Haven Vet Center), **Ed Mayer** (Butte County Housing Authority), **Preston Maynard** (VA Connecticut Errera Community Care Center), **Margaret Middleton** (Connecticut Veterans Legal Center), **Debra Minzy** (VA Connecticut), **Rick Porth** (United Way), **Robert Rosenheck** (Yale University), **John Sullivan** (VA Connecticut Errera Community Care Center), **Lisa Tepper-Bates** (Connecticut Coalition to End Homelessness), **Joan Twigg** (Connecticut Coalition to End Homelessness)