



# STAND **SMART** FOR HEROES

## BRIDGING THE GAP

How Existing Systems of Care Can Collaborate to Address Homelessness Among Veterans

### ISSUE/CHALLENGE

On a single night in January 2020, 37,252 veterans experienced homelessness in the United States.<sup>1</sup> Of those, 15,204 veterans were unsheltered — sleeping outside or in places not intended for human habitation, such as cars or abandoned buildings. In fiscal year 2020, the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) devoted almost \$1.85 billion to programs specifically aimed at addressing homelessness among veterans.<sup>2</sup> Alongside federal programs, the more than 38,000 nonprofit organizations that serve veteran or military populations receive roughly \$3.6 billion in funding each year.<sup>3</sup> Despite those tremendous investments, veterans still experience negative consequences as their social determinants of health and homelessness go unaddressed.<sup>4</sup>

According to the United States Interagency Council on Homelessness, ending homelessness means making sure that “every community will have a comprehensive response in place that ensures homelessness is prevented whenever possible, or if it can’t be prevented, [that] it is a rare, brief, and one-time experience.”<sup>5</sup> To end homelessness among veterans, communities must ensure that veterans have access to a coordinated system of services that address determinants of homelessness.

### KEY FINDINGS

The AHAR found that the number of veterans experiencing homelessness fell by half between 2009 and 2019. That number increased slightly in 2020, however, driven by a rise in the number of unsheltered veterans.<sup>6</sup>

Other important findings of the 2020 AHAR and CHALENG survey include the following:

- Although people who identify as non-white or as Hispanic/Latino make up about 23% of all veterans, they make up more than 43% of the veterans experiencing homelessness.<sup>7</sup>
- Public or publicly administered programs are successfully addressing many needs of the homeless veteran population. For example, public programs are addressing 9 of the top 10 needs that veterans experiencing homelessness identify as met—including the needs for medical services, case management, emergency shelter, and food.<sup>8</sup> The other major met need, clothing, is being addressed by private programs.
- Seven of the top 10 needs identified as unmet involve a need for legal assistance, such as help upgrading a military discharge or assistance in the areas of civil, criminal, tax, family, or housing law.
- Partnerships with providers in the legal, public health, and other communities are necessary to address veterans’ unmet needs.
- Childcare is among the top three unmet needs for both male and female veterans experiencing homelessness.

### RESEARCH CONDUCTED

Each year, HUD and VA conduct surveys to understand the prevalence of homelessness among veterans and to identify those veterans’ main needs. HUD’s Annual Homeless Assessment Report (AHAR) and VA’s Community Homelessness Assessment, Local Education and Networking Groups (CHALENG) survey show how many veterans are experiencing homelessness, where they are located, and what their top met and unmet needs are. The AHAR compiles data from the Point-in-Time count, a yearly count of homeless individuals in almost every community in the United States.

Public and private funders use the report to allocate resources to communities according to the scope of their need and their unique characteristics. VA’s CHALENG survey is administered each year to homeless veterans, service providers, and veterans’ advocates. The survey measures needs of homeless veterans and how well current programs are meeting those needs. Besides providing information about such needs, the survey was designed to encourage community organizations to plan and collaborate to serve veterans experiencing homelessness. Both the AHAR and the CHALENG survey highlight the complexity of the homelessness problem and the potential opportunities for governmental and nongovernmental support to address veterans’ unfilled needs.



## DISCUSSION

Community-based organizations are well-positioned and critically important to meet the unmet needs of veterans experiencing homelessness. The Bob Woodruff Foundation's Got Your 6 (GY6) network includes more than 100 community-based collaboratives across the country. Those collaboratives are led by nonprofit organizations that serve veterans, by VA-supported Community Veteran Engagement Boards (CVEBs), by institutions of higher education, and others.<sup>9</sup> In 2021, 53% of the collaboratives in the GY6 network reported that many or all of the veterans who sought their services had housing needs, although only 28% of the collaboratives had the capacity to satisfy such needs. In addition, 92% of the collaboratives reported that the veterans they served were seeking legal services, but only 20% of the collaboratives were fully satisfying the needs for those services.<sup>10</sup>

HUD's community-focused effort to end homelessness, the Continuum of Care (CoC) Program, emphasizes a "housing-first approach." It provides a framework for government and nonprofit organizations to collaborate to rehouse veterans quickly, remove barriers to and eligibility restrictions for housing, and coordinate access to mainstream programs. However, the CHALENG survey highlights shortcomings that still exist in local CoC affiliates and the need to expand collaborative partnerships to address the unmet needs reported by veterans and service providers. Too often, veterans seek care from organizations that are ill-equipped to identify legal needs or that are not actively collaborating with providers of legal resources. Meanwhile, many legal organizations do not actively participate in community-based collaboratives that serve veterans; thus, they struggle to identify veterans they might assist.

In recognition of those disconnects, a 2019 task force of the Legal Services Corporation recommended improvements that are especially appropriate to addressing the unmet needs of veterans experiencing homelessness.<sup>11</sup> Specifically, the task force emphasized improving and expanding collaborative systems of care, such as medical-legal partnerships involving legal resources within VA hospitals, and community collaboratives that include legal resources alongside established veterans' service organizations.

## GOALS FOR THE FUTURE

- Community-based collaboratives that serve the veteran and military populations must establish partnerships with the larger CoC program to complement existing resources for coordinating care for people who experience homelessness.
- The legal-aid community must collaborate with VA to implement innovative solutions such as medical-legal partnerships and must coordinate better with community-based collaboratives that serve veterans.
- Funders must recognize the complexity of homelessness and fund evidence-based approaches for addressing the social determinants of health that contribute to, prolong, or perpetuate homelessness.
- Service providers should recognize that people of color are over-represented among veterans experiencing homelessness and should ensure that they provide services equitably. Service providers should also actively partner with organizations that reach a diverse population, such as faith-based organizations, cultural heritage groups, and LGBTQ centers.
- Community-based collaboratives should join the Bob Woodruff Foundation's Got Your 6 network to receive resources and identify best practices that will help them increase their community's capacity for collective impact to address homelessness among veterans.

## REFERENCES

- <sup>1</sup> See Department of Housing and Urban Development, *The 2020 Annual Homeless Assessment Report (AHAR) to Congress* (January 2021), pp. 52–53, [www.huduser.gov/portal/sites/default/files/pdf/2020-AHAR-Part-1.pdf](http://www.huduser.gov/portal/sites/default/files/pdf/2020-AHAR-Part-1.pdf).
- <sup>2</sup> See National Alliance to End Homelessness, "Fiscal Year 2021 Federal Homeless Program Budget Chart" (no date), <https://tinyurl.com/5n965m47>.
- <sup>3</sup> See Douglas McCormick, Emma Moore, and Andrew Swick, *Changing Tides in the Sea of Goodwill: A Financial Analysis of Veteran-Serving Nonprofits* (Center for a New American Security, October 2018), <https://tinyurl.com/2p8eutsk>.
- <sup>4</sup> Social determinants of health are the conditions in a person's environment that "affect a wide range of health, functioning, and quality-of-life outcomes and risks." They include such things as economic stability; access to quality health care, quality education, and nutritious food; and safe housing and neighborhoods. See Department of Health and Human Services, "Healthy People 2030: Social Determinants of Health" (accessed January 17, 2022), <https://tinyurl.com/yxyp4pm>.
- <sup>5</sup> See United States Interagency Council on Homelessness, "What Does Ending Homelessness Mean?" (June 4, 2018), [www.usich.gov/goals/what-does-ending-homelessness-mean](http://www.usich.gov/goals/what-does-ending-homelessness-mean).
- <sup>6</sup> See Department of Housing and Urban Development, *The 2020 Annual Homeless Assessment Report (AHAR) to Congress* (January 2021), p. 52, [www.huduser.gov/portal/sites/default/files/pdf/2020-AHAR-Part-1.pdf](http://www.huduser.gov/portal/sites/default/files/pdf/2020-AHAR-Part-1.pdf).
- <sup>7</sup> See Jonathan E. Vespa, *Those Who Served: America's Veterans From World War II to the War on Terror*, American Community Survey Report ACS-43 (U.S. Census Bureau, June 2020), p. 8, [www.census.gov/library/publications/2020/demo/acs-43.html](http://www.census.gov/library/publications/2020/demo/acs-43.html); and Department of Housing and Urban Development, *The 2020 Annual Homeless Assessment Report (AHAR) to Congress* (January 2021), pp. 53–54, [www.huduser.gov/portal/sites/default/files/pdf/2020-AHAR-Part-1.pdf](http://www.huduser.gov/portal/sites/default/files/pdf/2020-AHAR-Part-1.pdf).
- <sup>8</sup> For a list of the top 10 met and unmet needs of veterans experiencing homelessness in 2020, see Department of Veterans Affairs, "Fact Sheet: Community Homelessness Assessment, Local Education and Networking Groups (CHALENG)" (April 2021), pp. 5–6, [www.va.gov/HOMELESS/docs/CHALENG-2020-508.pdf](http://www.va.gov/HOMELESS/docs/CHALENG-2020-508.pdf). Public programs include those administered by VA, HUD, and the Department of Agriculture.
- <sup>9</sup> For more information about the GY6 network, see Bob Woodruff Foundation, "Got Your 6" (accessed January 17, 2022), <https://bobwoodrufffoundation.org/got-your-6-network>.
- <sup>10</sup> Those findings come from the Bob Woodruff Foundation's Local Partner Self-Assessment Tool, a survey of collaboratives in the GY6 network that provides insights about the needs of veterans in local communities and about communities' ability to meet those needs.
- <sup>11</sup> See Legal Services Corporation, *2021 Report of the Veterans Task Force*, <https://tinyurl.com/2s35k28x>.