

Housing and Service Needs of Veterans

Housing Needs

A variety of different factors may affect homelessness among Veterans.

A research brief released by the Veterans Affairs' National Center on Homelessness among Veterans and the U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs ("VA"), found that a sample of Veterans who separated from the military from 2005-2006 had a 3.8% incident rate of homelessness over a five-year period. Despite being 10 years old, this research brief provided one of the most comprehensive correlations between homelessness and Veteran characteristics. The research brief's key findings show that:

- 72% of homeless Veterans came from the 44% of Veterans with the lowest pay grades;
- Veterans who were deployed had a 34% higher likelihood of becoming homeless; and
- 44% of homeless Veterans were also among 18% of Veterans diagnosed with behavioral health disorders -- especially psychotic disorders and substance abuse -- before discharge.¹

The research brief also indicated that other factors impacted Veterans' abilities to secure or maintain housing. Veterans in the lowest pay grades may have limited earning potential once exiting the military. This limited earning potential may demonstrate a possible barrier to finding or retaining housing. Therefore, one possible need of Veterans with limited earning potential may be affordable housing.

Because the research brief showed that Veterans who were deployed or who had a behavioral health disorder before discharge had a higher rate of homelessness, there may be unmet mental health care needs that prevent these Veterans from obtaining or maintaining housing. The United States Interagency Council on Homelessness ("USICH") supports a possible connection between behavioral health and homelessness, stating that Veterans have higher rates of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder ("PTSD"), and traumatic brain injury, which may impact the ability to maintain stable employment.² Finally, the research brief made reference to multiple and extended deployments which may contribute to a Veteran's social conflicts when reintegrating into civilian society. The rise in family conflict may be related to the fact that a majority of Veterans who experience homelessness are single, and "social isolation is associated with a higher risk of homelessness."³ While not specific housing issues, mental health and social isolation may need to be addressed for homeless Veterans to be able to facilitate their ability to successfully access and retain housing.

It should be noted that identifying housing needs is one aspect of homelessness. As stated in a Texas Veterans needs assessment published in March, 2016: "Though providing a homeless Veteran with shelter is immensely important, it is difficult to end the cycle of homelessness without also accounting for factors such as employment and mental health."⁴ The other needs assessment sections of this report having to do with mental health and rehabilitative needs are also vital in creating a stable housing environment.

¹ Metraux, 2013, p. 2-3.

² Unites States Interagency Council on Homelessness, 2015. p. 27.

³ Ibid, p. 2015

⁴ Kidder, Schafer, Carter, March 2016, p. 33.

The USICH goes on to state that nationwide, approximately half of Veterans experiencing homelessness have serious mental illness and 70 percent have substance use problems.⁵ These challenges, when not addressed sufficiently with appropriate and timely interventions, put Veterans at higher risk for involvement in the criminal justice system. USICH also finds that half of Veterans experiencing homelessness have a criminal record after being discharged from the military.⁶ According to the National Alliance to End Homelessness, criminal records are a barrier to obtaining housing and serious mental illness or chemical dependence may affect housing retention.⁷ Veterans with criminal records may have a need for lowered barriers to entry into housing, such as landlords or property managers that will accept persons with criminal backgrounds on a case-by-case basis.

While the VA National Center on Homelessness Among Veterans and the VA's research brief of Veterans who separated from the military from 2005-2006 did not find a statistical difference between the homeless rates of women and men Veterans⁸, women Veterans can face housing challenges that men do not. Women Veterans are more likely to have experienced sexual trauma than women in the general population and are more likely to be single parents than male Veterans.⁹ Persons who have experienced trauma may have mental health care needs that prevent them from getting and maintaining housing. A needs assessment in north Texas completed in 2016 found that "female Veterans struggling with homelessness faced more difficulty in placement than male Veterans in similar circumstances." The assessment cited that women Veterans experiencing homelessness were more likely to be accompanied by their children, which may create difficulty in finding space at a shelter for more than one person and which may create difficulty because women Veterans may not seek shelter for fear of losing custody of their children.¹⁰ Persons who are single parents need shelters that allow children, and may need housing units with multiple bedrooms, depending on family composition.

The research brief of Veterans who separated from the military from 2005-2006 focused on Veterans in the era of Afghanistan and Iraq conflicts, though the statistical correlations may be relevant to housing needs of Veterans of other eras. For example, the research brief found that a significant risk factor for homelessness for Veterans was a pre-separation diagnosis of PTSD, since this population was 13% more likely to become homeless than Veterans without the diagnosis. In addition, problematic discharges had a higher hazard for homelessness.¹¹ One barrier that some Veterans face when accessing housing is a dishonorable or other-than-honorable discharge. An other-than-honorable discharge is not a dishonorable discharge, but is a form of administrative separation from the military in which the Veteran loses benefits like VA housing, education, health care, and disability payments. Some of these other-than-honorable discharges may be a result of PTSD caused by military service.¹² Approval of claims related to PTSD could be considered a corollary issue to housing need, since the claim could relate to the access or retention of housing. Of the 260,000 Vietnam Veterans that have other-than-honorable discharges, the VA estimates that

⁵ Unites States Interagency Council on Homelessness, 2015, p. 28

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ National Alliance to End Homelessness, March 30, 2015.

⁸ Metraux, p. 2.

⁹ Perl, 2015, p. i.

¹⁰ Kidder, Schafer, and Carter, March 2016, p. 32

¹¹ Metraux, 2013, p. 2-3.

¹² Philpott, September 20, 2014.

about 80,000 had PTSD. However, PTSD was not an official diagnosis until 1980, which was five years after the Vietnam War ended.¹³

Research has found that “Although Veterans experience all types of homelessness, some evidence exists that they may be chronically homeless in higher numbers than nonVeterans.”¹⁴ By definition, chronically homeless persons have a disability, including a serious mental illness, substance use disorders, or ongoing health conditions, and have been homeless repeatedly or for a year or longer.¹⁵ More detail on the definition can be found in Appendix B. Chronically homeless individuals often use emergency shelters, jails, hospitals, and treatment programs. More than half of chronically homeless persons are unsheltered (*i.e.*, living on the streets).¹⁶ There are many different theories on how to meet the needs of persons experiencing chronic homelessness. Housing First is recognized nationally as one model to meeting the needs of persons experiencing chronic homelessness. Another approach for chronic homelessness is housing with services, as shown by the use of HUD-Veterans Affairs Supportive Housing (“VASH”) vouchers, which provides rental assistance with case management and clinical services provided by the VA.

Even as more Veterans experience homelessness than the general population, one research investigation published in 2012 found that there was no difference in treatment outcomes for chronically homeless Veterans and non-Veterans. The study compared 162 chronically homeless Veterans and 388 non-Veterans enrolled in a supportive housing program. During the year of the study, there were no differences between the Veterans and non-Veterans on housing or clinical status, and both groups improved. Even though Veterans face greater risk of becoming homeless than some civilian comparable populations, this research suggests that Veterans do not have less successful treatment outcomes.¹⁷

Service Needs of Veterans

Per the Department of Assistive and Rehabilitative Services (“DARS”), many soldiers continue to serve far from home during periods of war and active military conflicts, and some return to Texas with significant emotional and /or physical disabilities. For these veterans, the challenges of managing a disability are exacerbated as they attempt to reintegrate into society and secure both stable employment and permanent housing.

Securing employment is a key element of a veteran’s permanent recovery. Through the Vocational Rehabilitation Program, DARS continues to assist veterans with their efforts to return to work. In state fiscal year 2015, DARS served 81,029 Texas veterans, approximately 21% of the total state veteran population. Of this number, 3,111 honorably discharged veterans and 190 dishonorably discharged veterans received DARS services.

While the Veterans Administration (“VA”) remains the underpinning federal agency providing comprehensive services and programs for veterans, it is notable that DARS has identified veterans

¹³ O’Reilly, 2015.

¹⁴ Perl, 2015, p. 2.

¹⁵ National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2010.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Tsai, Mares and Rosenheck, 2012.

as an underserved population in Texas. Currently, the VA and DARS have a Memorandum of Agreement ("MOA") to work in partnership with one another to provide Texas veterans the highest possible level of care and support. Currently DARS does not have a fully integrated system for identifying the number of veterans who are homeless. However, DARS counselors understand veterans need stable, permanent housing to remain successfully employed, and have been connecting them with community housing resources. DARS counselors also continue to diligently collaborate with community partners to ensure veterans receive all necessary documents to return to work.