



The Veterans Community Resource and Referral Center in Portland is one of many established the country by the Department of Veterans Affairs to better connect VA services with housing for homeless veterans

STREET ROOTS PHOTO

The homecoming

Despite renewed support for voucher system to house veterans, local numbers fall short

BY ROBERT BRITT
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When Army veteran Mark Townsend left the military service in the early '70s, a decades-long battle with substance abuse and homelessness was just beginning.

Addiction marred Townsend's transition to civilian life and reduced him to living what he calls a "life of drinking and using." That life led to legal troubles, mental health issues and a lack of stable housing.

Townsend, now 54, says he repeatedly tried to get help. "I've been in and out of the VA several times, trying to get clean and sober, and couldn't."

Last August, he entered a residential substance abuse treatment program and was soon told of a federal program that could get him into subsidized housing while providing counseling and treatment for his addiction.

The Veterans Affairs Supportive Housing program (VASH) is a two-pronged approach to reduce homelessness among veterans. It couples government-subsidized rental vouchers from local, public housing authorities with case-managed assistance and clinical care provided by VA medical centers. When created, the program tasked a VA system already strained from the rising number of returning veterans from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan — with the new responsibility of managing a supportive housing program.

Although the VASH initiative began in 1992 with a small allotment of vouchers, significant funding started in 2008 with the

allocation of 10,000 additional vouchers. The program has increased to about 50,000 vouchers. As a result, veteran homelessness was reduced by 12 percent from 2010 to 2011, according to the Department of Housing and Urban Development and the VA.

Within four months, Townsend was assigned a case manager to help him through the steps needed to obtain housing. But his transition into housing was not without difficulty, and some city officials and social service workers say the same problems Townsend faced are keeping the VASH program from being fully utilized — more than 25 percent of the vouchers now issued to Portland are unused.

Townsend's history with drug abuse left him with a police record, including felonies, which he says caused two potential landlords to deny his application. Also, though the voucher covers the monthly rent, it doesn't address the other expenses required to get into housing. For Townsend, this meant he had to come up with a \$600 deposit for his apartment.

According to Dr. Chris Anderson, program manager for the Portland VA's mental health clinics in Vancouver, the biggest barrier to getting homeless veterans into housing, even with the support of the VASH program, is finding landlords willing to rent to them.

Additional barriers preventing more veterans from getting into housing are found in the program's design. Ultimately, Townsend was able to overcome the obstacles. Two months after starting to

work with his case manager, Townsend was living in Vancouver, Wash., in an apartment paid for with a VASH voucher. As of last month, Townsend has been clean and sober for a year and is one of more than the 33,000 veterans provided with permanent housing because of the VASH program.

The Department of Housing and Urban Development estimates that about 67,000 veterans were homeless during a one-night count in 2011, and as many as one in six adults staying in homeless shelters are veterans. Those who have worn a military uniform are nearly twice as likely as civilians to become homeless.

According to the Portland Housing Bureau, it's estimated that more than 1,400 veterans experienced homelessness at some point last year. On any given night, 220 people living unsheltered in the Portland area self-identified as veterans and an additional 240 are in shelters or transitional housing. In all, veterans account for an estimated 12.4 percent of Portland's homeless population.

The application of the VASH program begins at HUD, which distributes the vouchers to local public housing authorities, who then issue them. But according to HUD spokesman Leland Jones, the VA handles the majority of the legwork.

"We provide the housing resource," Jones says. "The actual identification and referral of a veteran for the program is essentially done by the Department of Veterans Affairs. They are essentially doing the intake and referring (qualified veterans) to the housing authorities, which have the vouchers."

Locally, Home Forward, Portland's public housing agency, has been given a total of 305 vouchers to date, and 200 veterans are currently living in housing paid for by VASH vouchers. Another 22 veterans have been assigned vouchers and are currently looking for apartments. The remaining 83 vouchers are left unused.

Unlike other housing vouchers, VASH removes nearly all of the restrictions that would otherwise disqualify a person from tradition supportive housing, says Jill Riddle, rental assistance coordinator at Home Forward.

"A normal voucher couldn't be issued to someone who had maybe recent drug or violent criminal activity on their record, and there are no screening requirements for us to conduct except for registered sex offenders," Riddle says.

Additionally, VASH vouchers are funded separately from other subsidized housing programs, which allow homeless veterans to bypass the waitlists at most public housing authorities.

Anderson says that although the VASH program is subsidized housing, it's not really a housing program. "It's really a case-management program," he says. "It's for those individuals who, without the help of case management and a social worker helping them and walking them through the steps, would not be able, most likely, to get housing on their own."

City Commissioner Nick Fish, who oversees the Portland Housing Bureau, says that the VASH program is effective because it combines the need for housing with the need for other care and services. With this housing first model, the veterans can become stabilized to receive employment counseling, clinical care, and mental health or substance abuse treatment.

Targeting the homeless veteran population is warranted. Veterans generally have higher rates of PTSD, traumatic brain injury and sexual trauma, all of which increase individuals' risk of homelessness, according to the U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness. About half of homeless

See **HOMECOMING**, page 7