

City rallies to help homeless veterans

Housing program makes gains as agencies join forces to overcome barriers

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After five years of federal buildup and more than six months of focus from community partners, the nation's largest program to house homeless veterans seems to be getting chinks out of the armor in the Portland area.

Veterans Affairs Supportive Housing (VASH) is the flagship federal program to address homelessness among veterans. A joint endeavor by the Departments of Veterans Affairs (VA) and Housing and Urban Development (HUD), VASH combines Section 8 rent assistance with case managed clinical care and counseling at VA medical centers.

As reported by Street Roots last August, bottlenecks within the VASH program and holes in where its funds could be spent led to nearly a third of the 305 vouchers available in Portland to go unused. But a community effort led by many of the local nonprofits already working to address homelessness has resulted in almost complete utilization of the local vouchers.

Home Forward, Portland's public housing authority, reports that 283 previously homeless veterans are now living in housing under VASH vouchers.

"We're finally doing really well," says Jill Riddle, rent assistance coordinator at Home Forward. "But it took us a long time to get here and it took a lot of pressure from the community."

It is estimated that nearly 1,400 veterans are homeless in Oregon, and according to the most recent point-in-time data available, 464 veterans were homeless in Multnomah County in 2011. Efforts to rapidly house area veterans under the VASH program were hampered by staffing issues at the VA medical center and a slow trickle of veterans referred to the program by the VA.

At the Portland housing bureau, Sally Erickson recognized there was a problem. She began convening a group that would eventually be called Operation 305, in reference to the number of local veterans that could be housed under a fully utilized VASH program.

Erickson invited key staff from the Portland VA Medical Center and local social service agencies already working with homelessness to monthly meetings. Barriers that stood in the way of getting veterans into housing were discussed and the group began to form workarounds.

Some obstacles were as simple as securing funding to cover \$35 rental application fees, according to Erickson. "There were literally disabled veterans going out and recycling bottles and cans to raise the money to pay that," says Erickson.

The problem, the group found, was that despite the VASH program's immense funding — HUD and the VA appropriated \$75 million in vouchers last year alone — restrictions on how the funds can be used

prevented many veterans from getting into housing.

VASH funds can only be used to pay for rent and cannot cover security deposits, transportation, application fees or past utility debts — what Bobby Weinstock, a housing consultant at Northwest Pilot Project, says is "everything that's actually required to get somebody into an apartment."

The Operation 305 meetings led to a temporary solution. The city, county, United Way and Home Forward each donated matching funds to create a \$40,000 pool of flexible funding that could be used to cover those costs. By tracking how those funds were used, Erickson and others found that the average cost to get a veteran from the street into housing under the VASH program was only about \$300 per veteran.

Mike Boyd, the VASH voucher coordinator at the Portland VA Medical Center, describes the improvements made as "night and day."

"Our community has come together in a pretty profound way," says Boyd. "Prior to having that fund, it was difficult. We had to work pretty closely with the community to get support on a case-by-case basis."

Boyd also credits the improvements to now having a fully staffed team of VASH social workers and clinicians. Previously, veterans were waiting to be issued vouchers because they were required to have a case manager assigned to them. However, the VA didn't have enough case managers on staff.

Despite the recent rise in the number of veterans successfully housed some still see the need for further improvements to the VASH program.

Problems getting VASH vouchers used has led to a significant loss of federal funds already earmarked to get Portland-area veterans into housing. Because only a fraction of the vouchers assigned to the Portland area were being used, Home Forward lost \$650,000 in recent HUD funding.

Additionally, the \$40,000 in flexible funds is being quickly used up, and as the city expects to receive a new batch of vouchers this spring, Weinstock worries that once that funding pool dries, the community will be stuck with the same barriers to housing veterans that it had last year.

"The long-term solution is to change the federal legislative language so that VASH funding will allow the payment of these essential moving costs — not only for the Portland VA, but across the country," says Weinstock. "If they just add language that makes it more flexible, the way VASH funds are utilized, then the problem will be solved."

The VASH program's success is also limited by Portland's tight rental market, which Riddle says has a vacancy rate of less than 3 percent.

According to Carolyn Bateson, who

coordinates homeless services at the Portland VA Medical Center, this low vacancy rate combined with the sometimes-muddled rental histories many homeless veterans have means that even after a VASH voucher has been assigned to a veteran, it is still a challenge to find a landlord willing to rent to them.

At a roundtable meeting with many of the VASH stakeholders in January, Riddle was asked about landlords' stereotypes of voucher programs in general, and she offered her opinion that there is some discrimination of voucher holders.

"Rather than just thinking that these are people who are poor, there are other connotations: that they'd be a bad renter, that they are going to tear up the unit, that they're not going to be responsible. And that's just not true," Riddle said. "The VASH folks have a lot of barriers, but they also have intensely wrapped-around services, so they are the ideal candidate for a landlord who really wants to help out in the community."

Because Home Forward is part of a federal pilot program granting public housing authorities with additional flexibility in how they can spend funds, unique steps are being taken to improve its voucher programs such as VASH.

Home Forward covers veterans' security deposits, maintains a guarantee fund designed to comfort landlords worried that tenants with no income could leave behind damages to their rental units, and sends a letter of thanks with a \$100 incentive for landlords leasing to VASH voucher holders for the first time.

VASH is the cornerstone of the VA's plan to end veteran homelessness by 2015. Five years into the VASH program, HUD and the VA have appropriated for nearly 50,000 vouchers nationwide.

According to the most recent data available, HUD and the VA estimate that more than 62,000 veterans were homeless on a single night in 2012. This is a 7.2 percent reduction from the previous year's estimate and a 17.2 percent decline from the 2009 figures — cuts largely credited to the VASH efforts.

Veterans are twice as likely to become homeless and are overrepresented in the homeless population, according to the VA. In Portland, it's estimated that 12.4 percent of the homeless maintain veteran status.

By targeting the chronically homeless and coupling rent assistance with VA care, the program falls under the Housing First model, which prioritizes housing before dealing with health care and other support.

VASH also removes most restrictions that accompany standard Section 8 rental assistance, such as income requirements and eligibility for people with criminal records.

But the process to house veterans with a VASH voucher doesn't begin until a veteran is screened by personnel from a VA medical center and then referred to a public housing authority for the rent assistance voucher.

As they have done with Operation 305, Portland's partners working with the VASH program came together in January for a roundtable discussion at the Bud Clark Commons that coincided with the annual homeless count.

With Assistant Secretary of Veterans Affairs Joan Mooney in attendance, local policy makers and community partners pitched Portland's improvements to the VASH program as an example for other communities.

Mooney, the VA's chief adviser on legislative affairs, likened the buildup of the VASH program since 2008 to "building the airplane as we're flying it," and said that Portland presented a compelling case for additional flexibility in VASH funds. "We're learning as we go, so your experiences really help," Mooney said.

Still concerned that a lack of flexibility with the VASH funds poses a problem, Weinstock says he is working with the office of Sen. Jeff Merkley to alter the VASH legislation and allow for increased discretionary spending of VASH dollars.

In addition to the 283 veterans now in housing under local VASH vouchers, 52 more have been assigned vouchers and are looking for apartments. "We've been told

we're getting more vouchers, so we're trying to stay ahead of the game," says Riddle.

At the housing bureau, Erickson says no one wants to have a surplus of unused vouchers on hand when HUD allocates the next round of vouchers. "If

we were where we were a year ago, with 100 vouchers going unused, I don't think we'd be as competitive to get more vouchers," Erickson says.

Northwest Pilot Project housing consultant Jessica Larson says the importance of a fully functioning VASH program extends beyond the veterans living on the streets.

"It helps house veterans, but what it also does is it helps the larger community house everyone because it frees up resources," Larson says. "So the more successful VASH is, the more successful we all can be in helping to end homelessness."



PHOTO BY ROBERT BRITT

From left to right, U.S. Rep. Suzanne Bonamici, Assistant Secretary of Veterans Affairs Joan Mooney and Portland City Commissioner Nick Fish listen to community members' feedback during a public forum on veteran homelessness at the Bud Clark Commons in January.