

Ending Veterans Homelessness

Austin's Homeless Veterans Initiative (AHVI) began in 2013 with funding from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs and consisted of multiple programs/agencies working to house Veterans experiencing homelessness.

The AHVI is a coalition of “boots on the ground” community providers working to implement this effort. The key partners include the City of Austin Mayor's Office, Ending Community Homelessness Coalition (CoC); the Central Texas Veterans Health Care System (HUD-VASH & HCHV Programs); The Housing Authority of the City of Austin; Caritas of Austin-SSVF (P2); Front Steps-SSVF (P1) Collaborative (Front Steps, Caritas of Austin, Salvation Army; Goodwill of Central Texas); Green Doors-VA Grant Per Diem; A New Entry; Austin Travis County Integral Care; Texas Veterans Commission, Travis County Veteran Services Office and many other Veteran Service Organizations. Agencies use a shared community-wide master list of Veterans in need of housing and coordinate with each other to house them. Partners collect data on Veterans experiencing homelessness on a real-time basis, which enables assistance to occur quickly. The AHVI has met regularly since December 2014 to implement the local strategy and address barriers to achieving functional zero for Veteran homelessness.

Mayor Adler's Task Force

In May 2015 Mayor Adler convened a passionate group of community stakeholders to support and tackle Veterans' homelessness head on. Mayor Adler's Task Force included representation from Senator Kirk Watson's office, the Austin Apartment Association, the Austin Board of Realtors, the Austin Chamber of Commerce, and other dedicated community leaders. This group reached out to fellow passionate citizens and stakeholders to raise funds for the **Housing Our Heroes Fund**. The Fund has been instrumental in assisting Veterans to quickly access permanent housing, while mitigating any risks assessed by the partnering properties. Mayor Adler's Task Force also led the way in identifying housing providers to offer low barrier, high opportunity housing for Veterans exiting homelessness.

The Task Force provided leadership and opportunity for the Mayor's Challenge to End Veteran Homelessness. The group met on a weekly basis to develop significant strategies to overcome Austin's greatest barrier to achieving functional zero, which is the lack of availability of affordable, low-barrier housing.

Collaboration with the United States Interagency Council on Homelessness (USICH)

USICH provided these criteria to assist communities:

- No chronically homeless Veterans remain homeless, or they are housed in 90 days
 - For Veterans refusing to be housed, plan for continual outreach and a resource will be available when and if they choose to be housed
- On average, homeless Veterans are housed within 90 days of being identified
- The number of Veterans being housed is greater than the number becoming homeless on a monthly basis
- The number of Veterans entering into transitional housing is less than the number becoming homeless on a monthly basis

Federal funding provides housing vouchers with services, and the Supportive Services for Veterans Families (SSVF) program assists with rapid re-housing and short-term rental assistance with services. Additional resources have been provided such as extra Section 8 vouchers from local Public Housing Authorities and move-in kits and furniture from local non-profits and businesses.

Over 900 Veterans have been housed and Veteran homelessness is down significantly since 2011 when Veterans accounted for over 14% of the homeless population. Currently, Veterans account for less than 3% of the homeless population. In 2016 the USICH certified Austin as having effectively ended Veteran homelessness.

When we say we have “functionally ended” Veteran homelessness, we have reached a point where we are housing more Veterans than those who are being identified as homeless. This means that any Veteran who becomes homeless and wants housing will move into permanent housing within an average of 90 days of connecting with our community-based response system.

Ongoing Strategies

Austin learned a great deal from this collaboration and continues to use the following strategies for effective collaboration:

- Community coordinated outreach using common assessment tools which have increased identification of homeless Veterans
- Creation of community by-name lists of current homeless Veterans that are prioritized by vulnerability to triage homeless Veterans to the appropriate resources
- Following Housing First principles, which provide an approach to ending homelessness that centers on housing people experiencing homelessness as quickly as possible and then providing services as needed
- Weekly community meetings to assess barriers and implement process improvements/acceleration strategies aimed at removing bottlenecks, and
- Increased engagement of Veteran specific resources with mainstream non-Veteran specific resources with emphasis on healthcare, behavioral health, and employment services.

The Austin Homeless Veterans Initiative will continue to assess Veteran household needs and ensure supportive services are available to sustain long-term housing stability for all Veterans. While we have utilized critical federal funds through SSVF, HUD-VASH and other HUD programs, we recognize that federal funding is not guaranteed. In order to sustain this success, we will need to leverage other funding opportunities. In 2019, The AHVI community stakeholders continue to address housing stabilization, advocate for critical resources to help Veterans maintain their housing as well as leverage the successful strategies established.