

Rockford, Illinois: Ending and Sustaining an End to Veteran Homelessness



Rockford, Illinois reached functional zero, effectively ending veteran homelessness in December 2015.

TOP 8 LESSONS LEARNED FROM ROCKFORD:

1. Have the right leadership in place to bring urgency and attention to the effort
2. Take tangible action toward a shared aim, with a day-to-day driver at the wheel
3. Publicly commit to ending veteran homelessness
4. Have an outsider bring together key stakeholders
5. Identify and secure an engaged and committed leader and staffer at the local VA
6. Reach out to a GPD provider you believe is willing to work with you on program changes
7. As a local VSO to play a role
8. Have a regular public forum in which to hold stakeholders accountable

BEFORE BUILT FOR ZERO

In late 2014, a member of the city's community action staff, which serves as the city's social services agency, was concerned that the community's effort to end veteran homelessness had lost its focus and progress. She and other community stakeholders researched what had been achieved elsewhere through the 100,000 Homes Campaign. They liked the approach and decided to relaunch the community effort to end veteran homelessness by signing onto Built for Zero (then Zero: 2016). As Rockford launched the initiative, the city lead brought the service providers together, kept them informed and on track, and ensured they were both making short term goals and kept an eye on the long-term goal— to achieve functional zero for homeless veterans.

In addition to the city's social services manager, the other key Rockford stakeholders included:

- **The Mayor.** The Mayor had already been working with technical assistance providers from the Strong Cities, Strong Communities (SC2) initiative, and after discussing this opportunity with them and staff, he felt it was a good initiative to join. He attended an entire day-long HUD training at the beginning of the Mayors Challenge to get grounded and show the community his personal commitment. Throughout the initiative and beyond, the mayor has been involved, asking for and reviewing monthly updates from the community.
- **VA's Outreach Coordinator.** Having a single point of contact at the VA and one who worked full-time on homelessness proved very valuable.
- **Senior leader of the Veteran Assistance Commission.** This county agency focuses exclusively on vulnerable veterans, ensuring a constant focus on homeless veteran population.
- **The local Grant and Per Diem (GPD) provider.** The provider recognized the need to work with community partners if Rockford was to be successful. The agency, which also is a mental health provider, made a number of operational changes to help Rockford to get to zero. In particular, the GPD provider became more willing to refer people to the single point of entry for intakes, to provide names to places on the by-name List, and more open to placing veterans

in permanent or Rapid Rehousing placements rather than keeping clients indefinitely in its transitional program.

OVERCOMING OBSTACLES

While striving to reach functional zero, Rockford encountered several obstacles:

- **The local VA initially wouldn't meet with the City to discuss or be involved in the initiative, much less provide veteran-specific information.** A Federal employee embedded in the community as an SC2 representative saw the disconnect and brought the VA and other community partners together to begin to work together. A new leader in the local VA and the hiring of a VA outreach coordinator quickly resulted in the VA being a positive and key partner.
- **Another obstacle was having clients in the 16-bed GPD program typically stay for a year or longer.** The GPD provider, like the other stakeholders, felt the pressure to reach the goal. Rather than be defensive, the GPD provider was open minded to find ways to contribute to reaching the goal. One positive development was collaboration between the GPD provider and the local PHA. The VA and PHA offered up HUD-VASH vouchers to clients who were exiting GPD. Connecting the GPD program to a permanent housing resource— typically Rapid Rehousing— both reduced the length of time in transitional housing and created flow in the system.
- **A continuing obstacle has been the difficulty in housing veterans with addiction issues.** Finding and communicating with landlords who would be willing to house these clients proved helpful. The stakeholders worked with landlords and PHAs to offer support services to clients including some low-intensity follow-up case management. Only one has returned to homelessness due to his alcoholism but he is about to be re-housed again. Providers will continue to offer these services to help ensure continued stability.
- **Another continuing challenge is that many veterans, even when housed, need help with transportation to doctor's appointments, shopping, etc.** Initially city leaders secured and issued 60 free 90-day bus passes for veterans. The county is currently working to secure a discount for bus transportation through its Transportation Department. In the meantime, the Community Action Agency has used Community Services Block Grant funds to help support funding transportation for veterans who have to get out to look for employment, attend meetings, or get to their medical appointments.

WHAT MADE A DIFFERENCE?

To keep a constant community focus on the goal, the mayor required the city lead to regularly provide updates in a community forum called Rockstat. All City departments are required to present on their particular issue during this meeting once a quarter, but the Mayor required that the Veteran initiative be on the agenda every month.

As for **specific policies implemented** to help achieve functional zero:

- The stakeholders instituted a preference for veterans in their Coordinated Entry System. Extra points were assigned to veterans and those veterans who were most acute. CoC PSH resources were targeted to those who were not eligible for VA housing resources.
- Both PHAs gave preference to Veterans. One of the PHAs also gave preference for homelessness.
- Several nonprofit PSH providers worked specifically with veterans.

There were also **structural/systemic changes** that made a difference:

- The local VA hired a Housing Specialist to find more landlords and develop strong relationships with them and, overall, to house veterans more quickly. The specialist conducted outreach, made calls as well as in-person contacts to explain the initiative to landlords and to encourage their participation. The housing specialist also led landlord-

tenant mediation when issues arose.

- More and better coordinated outreach. For instance, PATH outreach workers, who search for mentally ill homeless persons, upon finding a homeless veteran, would bring the veteran to the Community Action Agency for assessment.
- Realigned funding streams to prioritize veterans. For example, the local ESG Rapid Rehousing funding was specifically used for veterans. And the Community Service Block Grant (CSBG) funding was also directed towards homeless veterans.

MID-COURSE IMPROVEMENTS

There were several needed adjustments to stay on course:

- To eliminate confusion over the various definitions for veterans being used by different agencies, the community worked with its Built for Zero coach to develop and use a single, expansive definition.
- The community had been placing veterans on an "off" list when it lost contact after 30 days. It changed that threshold to 90 days, consistent with national guidance.
- Outreach workers started looking in non-traditional places to find veterans, including jails and hospitals.

AFTER ACHIEVING FUNCTIONAL ZERO

The community achieved functional zero on December 15, 2015. Today, Rockford houses veterans in fewer than 30 days, with the exception of those housed through GPD. Rockford doesn't use other metrics to track sustainability, finding the functional zero definition and the average time to house a veteran as sufficient. To keep its focus on functional zero, the local team is:

- Holding case conferencing monthly
- Keeping the by-name list current. Aside from monthly meetings, members still report new veterans at any time and these names are added. The community has also began having a bi-weekly chronic homelessness meeting where some new veterans have been discovered and then placed onto the veterans by-name list. Searches are also done in HMIS to find new entries.
- Continuing to report to the Mayor monthly.
- Pursuing active communication among stakeholders as issues arise
- Messaging that sustainability does not rest on any one person but on all stakeholders

WHAT ARE THE BIGGEST THREATS TO SUSTAINING FUNCTIONAL ZERO?

- Maintaining progress with GPD. The community is working with the GPD provider to consider using a portion of its 16 beds for bridge housing and perhaps converting some units to permanent housing. The bed number for GPD has now been reduced and the provider is in the process of working out the details of making the other units bridge housing.
- The community will get no or few additional HUD-VASH vouchers and as a result, the by-name list will likely grow. The community has been allocated 5 new vouchers, but it expects this will not be enough to keep up with new veterans coming into the system.
- The state has not passed a budget since the summer of 2015, severely limiting any state funding to support the initiative. In response, the team informs new clients that resources are very limited and charges them to do their part in seeking employment and other supports. Currently a stop-gap budget is in place.
- Some confusion remains on the different definitions of ending veteran homelessness and the benchmarks used

WHAT WOULD HAVE BEEN GOOD TO HAVE KNOWN EARLIER?

- The absolute importance of a quality by-name list to measure progress
- Need to meet with the GPD provider and address how GPD can be retooled to complement the effort to end veteran homelessness

HOW HAVE EFFORTS ON VETERAN HOMELESSNESS IMPACTED YOUR WORK?

- Provided hope and confidence that despite severe state budget cuts, Rockford can make progress on solving difficult issues.
- Homeless clients in Rockford are more willing to reach out for help because they see the commitment from providers to solve homelessness.
- Local team has created an approach with veterans that it is now applying to ending chronic homelessness. There is no need to reinvent the wheel.