

The Gulf Coast, Mississippi: Ending and Sustaining an End to Veteran Homelessness



Gulf Coast, Mississippi reached functional zero, effectively ending veteran homelessness in September, 2015.

TOP 9 LESSONS LEARNED FROM GULFPORT:

1. Leader served with a soft touch, encouraging not demanding change when needed
2. Leader regularly helped assess progress of the stakeholders and re-focus the group when necessary
3. Find a housing resource for veterans who are not eligible for any of VA's programs
4. Make changes to SSVF grants, if needed, to match those resources to the need
5. Problem solve individual issues between case conferencing sessions— don't wait
6. Enter all persons living on the street into HMIS so all homeless persons— both unsheltered and sheltered— are on the community's radar
7. Don't create a system around personalities, but agencies
8. Message a concrete definition of what it means to end veteran homelessness. Do this early and often.
9. If a veteran falls back into homelessness, know this in real time and immediately reach out to their previous service provider to problem-solve

BEFORE BUILT FOR ZERO

Various agencies, given the emphasis by the federal government, had individually been focusing on ending veteran homelessness. A number of key agencies were implementing Housing First, SSVF case managers were using high threshold scores for SSVF prevention to help ensure veterans assisted were those most at risk of becoming homeless, and the local VA targeted VASH to chronically homeless veterans through street outreach.

But prior to Built for Zero, real collaboration among the stakeholders was modest. A state initiative to share HMIS data between CoCs statewide helped local stakeholders get better data and increase collaboration. The Gulf Coast region had also participated in the 100,000 Homes Campaign, which further brought stakeholders together to focus on ending veteran homelessness. With these individual and collaborative efforts underway, and a national goal to end veteran homelessness by December 2015, the Gulf Coast, consisting of the Cities of Gulfport and Biloxi and six counties were ready to join Built for Zero.

GETTING STARTED

Once the two mayors signed on to Built for Zero (then called Zero: 2016) and committed to end veteran homelessness by December 31, 2015, local stakeholders worked backwards to determine what needed to be accomplished by when.

The Gulf Coast stakeholders played key roles and worked very collaboratively. The two mayoral offices provided political will to the community, but the CoC leader guided the effort. The CoC stepped into a role as the day-to-day glue keeping the initiative moving forward in a coordinated way. The local VA and the SSVF grantee strategically provided critical housing and service resources. As an example, the SSVF provider covers half the state, but to make an impact it temporarily focused exclusively on the coast because the region's quality by-name list (scored against Built for Zero's rigorous data standards) identified that region as the area of most concentrated need. The VA and the PHA provider in that region worked closely together to expedite the process to house veterans.

The COC leader supported individual agency efforts already underway, encouraged group efforts to coalesce on ending veteran homelessness, assessed whether goals were being met each month and helped the group re-focus when needed. This enabled stakeholders to think creatively about how each could contribute individually and as a group to achieve the goal.

OVERCOMING OBSTACLES

The Gulf Coast faced a variety of obstacles. The two largest challenges were: insufficient funding and homeless veterans who often came to the Gulf Coast from other cities and states to access a residential treatment program and would then choose to stay on the Gulf Coast upon discharge.

Regarding the funding obstacle, early on one SSVF provider lost its funding and the other SSVF provider was only serving 25 Veterans in its service area. Given this challenge, stakeholders worked together to repurpose SSVF funding to spend over 70 percent, and at times 100 percent, for Rapid Re-housing (well above the standard 60 percent). The local SSVF providers in Jackson and Hattiesburg amended their grant to serve an additional geographic area that wasn't being served so that more homeless veterans could access help.

To confront the second major obstacle (a large number of homeless veterans moving to the Gulf Coast), the local VA assigned two outreach workers to serve in the community almost the entire duration of the initiative. The only time they spent in their offices was the time they spent doing intake. Moreover, an area GPD provider helped ensure discharged veterans from a nearby treatment facility didn't fall onto the streets and then worked with other stakeholders to place them in permanent housing.

WHAT MADE A DIFFERENCE?

Several actions helped the community get across the finish line:

- The regional VA coordinator held monthly calls with the community, in addition to a monthly in-person meeting convened by the CoC. This focus from both the CoC and the VA helped keep the urgency in place and allowed stakeholders a regular forum to problem solve when needed.
- Case conferencing was held in person once a month and was supplemented by information sharing between meetings to discuss individual cases
- The CoC shared data not just within the CoC, but also across all CoCs in the state, enabling Gulfport, for instance, to better understand the prior history of veterans coming from other communities
- If a veteran wasn't eligible for existing VA assistance, a particular community-based provider without eligibility limits jumped in to house the homeless veteran. In addition, this same agency rehabbed 8 new units of PSH for homeless veterans.
- The region consistently used acuity scoring to ensure that veterans received rightsized housing and support interventions for their particular needs
- The region created a coordinated entry portal in HMIS for all persons living on the streets, including veterans, so that all homeless veterans could be known by all stakeholders

- The local team worked hard to implement coordinated outreach across the CoC geography, recording information about each veteran as well as which provider was working with each veteran so that when housing became available, that specific provider could help quickly

AFTER ACHIEVING FUNCTIONAL ZERO

The Gulf Coast region achieved functional zero in September 2015. Currently it takes an average of 11 days to house a newly homeless veteran in the region, from initial identification to being housed. For those veterans who were housed and then found themselves at risk of falling back into homelessness, the CoC now reaches out to the housing provider who helped them initially with a request to step in and help keep the veteran housed. The CoC now knows from its by-name list data that those veterans who have fallen back into homelessness have tended to do so roughly two years after being housed.

After achieving the goal, Gulf Coast has not slowed or stopped. Local stakeholders have a standing agenda item for every CoC meeting to discuss housing sustainability among their veterans. The CoC's veterans committee continues to update its BNL, and SSVF prevention funds continue to be used exclusively for veterans with a high threshold scores. Notwithstanding, the funds are almost exhausted so stakeholders continue to discuss other housing options, including available CoC and ESG funding.

As for systems and governance that local stakeholders have put into place to help sustain functional zero:

- They update their by-name list monthly
- The Gulf Coast uses this list to track inflow of newly homeless veterans by name
- The community also uses HMIS to track whether housed veterans are falling back into homelessness
- The Gulf Coast region does not rely on any particular personality to stay on top of sustainability. Instead, it has focused on institutionalizing the participation of agencies, not individuals.
 - As a result of this focus, agencies have staff depth, so turnover doesn't stymie progress. For instance, a key PHA stakeholder was recently promoted, and the replacement staffer was already familiar with the veteran initiative and readily embraced her new role without missing a beat.

BIGGEST THREATS TO SUSTAINING FUNCTIONAL ZERO

The biggest threat would have been to lose a consistent, urgent focus on maintaining functional zero. To guard against that, Gulf Coast has different staff and leaders work on veteran homelessness than they do for chronic and family/youth homelessness. Gulf Coast also uses different resources for different populations. For instance, the team decided early on not to use all of its CoC PSH for veterans, as leaders knew much of that resource would be needed later to focus on an end to chronic homelessness.

WHAT WOULD HAVE BEEN HELPFUL TO KNOW SOONER?

Gulf Coast would have begun messaging what functional zero meant earlier and continued that messaging throughout

the process. When the stakeholders announced the achievement, the public wasn't fully aware what functional zero meant, detracting from the historic achievement.

HOW HAS THE VETERAN WORK IMPACTED WORK WITH OTHER POPULATIONS?

Ending veteran homelessness gave the region and the community stakeholders confidence. Almost immediately, they created a by-name list for chronic homelessness, and while ending chronic homelessness comes with new challenges, including community support, the team has confidence it can be done. It has a real-time, by-name list, it has strong landlord relationships developed through the veteran effort, and it has a clear roadmap of the process it used during that effort.