Montgomery County, Maryland:
Ending and Sustaining an End to Veteran Homelessness

Built For Zero.
COMMUNITY SOLUTIONS

Montgomery County, Maryland reached functional zero, effectively ending veteran homelessness in December, 2015

TOP 10 LESSONS LEARNED FROM MONTGOMERY COUNTY:

1. Montgomery was led by a public-private partnership between a nonprofit and a county government leader so that both sectors were invested. The campaign was staffed by a campaign manager funded by the County and housed at the nonprofit, and a county staff person within the CoC, both of whom were dedicated to ensuring the success of the effort.
2. Be very creative in reaching out to and maintaining strong relationships with landlords.
3. Focus the data for achieving the goal
4. Obtain broad-based consensus on the definition of veteran (include active duty service without regard to discharge status)
5. Seek and secure local funds to serve veterans who cannot readily be housed with remaining federal resources.
6. Have a readily available and responsive point of contact in the community to resolve all issues related to housing
7. One-day turnaround on determining veteran status
8. Don't let off the gas after achieving functional zero
9. Establish clear communication between the community and the VA to maximize the use of VA housing resources
10. Many veterans will need more than a short-term rental subsidy to stay housed

BEFORE BUILT FOR ZERO

A number of factors contributed to preparing Montgomery County to join Built for Zero:

- 10-year plan to end homelessness had expired
- The community had a good relationship with the local VA through the recent creation of a VA Safe Haven program
- The CoC had a strong connection to the County Veterans Commission.
- Had participated in the 100,000 Homes Campaign and had begun to identify clients by name
- Opening Doors was released by the Federal partners as the new framework for tackling homelessness and Montgomery County (MC) adopted the framework and the population goals of the federal plan as the foundation for the development of a second 10-year plan to prevent and end homelessness in the County

With these things in place, the community was ready for the intentional focus that Built for Zero (then Zero: 2016) offered on ending veteran homelessness.

GETTING STARTED

The stakeholders realized for them to be successful, the initiative needed to be led both by someone inside and outside of government so that it wouldn't be just one sector pulling the other along. The Executive Director of the Montgomery County Coalition for the Homeless and the MC Department of Health and Human Services Chief of Special Needs Housing were joined at the hip in securing support from stakeholders and community members for the initiative. This

allowed both of them to work within their sector to help stakeholders embrace Housing First, move to a by-name list and implement the VI-SPDAT.

Key stakeholders included the Montgomery County Coalition for the Homeless, the County Veterans Commission, the County Department of Health and Human Services, the local VA, the Public Housing Agency, the County Council President and the County Executive, who is a veteran.

OVERCOMING OBSTACLES

The community overcame four key obstacles:

- The community had a difficult time initially coordinating with the local VA. Without a clear communication line, it was difficult to get agreement on a number of key issues such as understanding how GPD should be operating.
- Creating a quality by-name list was very challenging. Deciding whether it would be in HMIS or not, and resolving issues with the local VA, which services multiple COCs, were both very time consuming
- The SSVF grant covered various CoCs in the area, making it hard to know to whom they were answerable and how to encourage an increase in housing placements
- Finally, many stakeholders had different views on who was eligible for VA and other programs. This lack of understanding threatened progress at times.

WHAT MADE A DIFFERENCE?

- A firm, public deadline drove urgency community-wide
- The County made $500,000 available to serve veterans not eligible for VA benefits
    - To make expeditious use of these funds, County staff pulled out all stops (for instance, they committed to inspecting units within 24 hours)
- County dedicated a full-time staffer to resolve any housing-related issues, including landlord and inspections problems
- Because of the need to expeditiously house more veterans, SSVF was supplemented by re-assigning CoC Rapid Rehousing funds to house veterans
- The nonprofit partner took the lead on external communications to seek community support during the budget cycle, to educate the community about overall efforts to end homelessness, and to solicit engagement in donating furniture and household items and moving veterans with these items into housing
- The community used non-traditional modes to find, develop and maintain relationships with landlords, including:
    - Using Craigslist and other such sites to find units
    - Introducing the housing team directly to new landlords so landlords could see the backup support tenants would have
    - Delivering flowers to new landlords to show appreciation
    - Taking a picture of the veteran to be housed with his housing team so the landlord would know who would be coming to the unit

MID-COURSE IMPROVEMENTS

- Using the by-name list to make assumptions about the numbers of new veterans coming into the system and being housed each month, Montgomery County identified the number of veterans to be housed. Armed with this information the County developed targets for the portion of persons who would and would not be eligible for VA benefits, and those that would need Rapid Rehousing versus permanent supportive housing. Those eligible for VA benefits were connected to HUD-VASH and SSVF.
- The County appropriated local funding for Rapid Rehousing and permanent supportive housing for homeless veterans who would not be eligible for VA resources
- In addition to housing these veterans, the community also had veterans present who were eligible for HUD-VASH but for whom the resource wasn't available because the existing HUD/VASH supply had already been used and more were needed. As such, a number of veterans with significant needs who were eligible for HUD-VASH and required a

long-term subsidy were housed using County general funds that are not as stable a source of long-term assistance

AFTER ACHIEVING FUNCTIONAL ZERO

Montgomery received confirmation from Community Solutions that they had met functional zero on January 7, 2016. Today, they are able to house veterans within 30 days of identification. To stay at functional zero, Montgomery has not changed its approach other than continuing to hold meetings such as case conferencing, though less frequently. Montgomery has found it to be imperative to carefully track inflow so that if there aren't enough housing resources, local leaders can advocate for more. The community also recognizes the need to robustly use SSVF for prevention and secure additional HUD-VASH vouchers for those needing deeper assistance. The following are key for Montgomery to sustain functional zero:

- A weekly meeting of the core team is held every Monday to discuss key issues: updates from the local VA on someone that should be added to the by-name list; assessing current length of time needed to house veterans; identifying issues to raise with individual providers to stay on course
- Case conferencing sessions still held, but now monthly
- Weekly data reports for leadership compiled and shared, but less frequently
- A weekly call with the local VA on VA-centric issues, including VA outreach and HUD-VASH
- A monthly meeting with key providers to discuss issues on veteran housing sustainability and program needs
- Continuing to determine veteran status within 24 hours
- Assessing whether to establish a housing preference for veterans to help ensure there are sufficient housing resources to stay at functional zero

WHAT ARE THE BIGGEST THREATS TO SUSTAIN FUNCTIONAL ZERO?

- The county's Chief of Special Needs Housing passed away. He was a forceful advocate for ending veteran homelessness. A replacement was recently hired who has expressed a strong commitment to maintaining functional zero but needs to get up to speed with the full set of the position's responsibilities.
- Montgomery County is concerned they will not have sufficient permanent housing resources to continue to house 6-8 veterans per month
- The SSVF grant servicing Montgomery County also serves Washington, DC, which is still working to end veteran homelessness. As such there is not as robust engagement in Montgomery County and there are no SSVF prevention funds available for Montgomery County, which limits the team's ability to prevent veterans from becoming homeless.

WHAT WOULD HAVE BEEN GOOD TO KNOW EARLIER?

- The numbers won't magically go down just because there's a goal to end veteran homelessness. Stakeholders need to be intentional early on to do whatever it takes to reduce the number of veterans who are homeless.
- With multiple CoCs in the region being served by one VA, stakeholders would have reached out to the VA much earlier to cement a clear understanding of how SSVF, including prevention, could be most strategically used
- The full range of potential partners that would be required was unknown at the beginning of the team's effort. Some key players felt left out once the team started gaining speed and seeing the end in sight, and these players

attempted to undermine the goal.

HOW HAVE EFFORTS ON VETERAN HOMELESSNESS IMPACTED YOUR WORK ON OTHER POPULATIONS?

• Montgomery County now knows the recipe to end homelessness for any population: create a real-time, by-name list, be very intentional, hold an action camp when focus is needed, get clear together about next steps, be fully committed to achieving the goal and start right away.
• Ending veteran homelessness wrought a paradigm shift in the community by proving that ending homelessness was possible. Stakeholders all now know it's possible for other populations.
• By achieving the goal, County officials gained confidence to appropriate additional local funds for both sustaining an end to veteran homelessness and separately to help end chronic homelessness.   In fact, they appropriated an additional $150,000 in the FY17 budget to increase the number of permanent supportive housing units for veterans not eligible for VA resources.