

Riverside County, California: Ending and Sustaining an End to Veteran Homelessness



COMMITTING TO ENDING VETERAN HOMELESSNESS

In 2013, the Riverside County Board of Supervisors took the lead in our community to focus on veteran homelessness. The Board's leadership brought in community leaders and staff of various county departments and other area agencies to begin what became our "Valor" Initiative. The City of Riverside joined the 25 Cities Initiative, with Mayor Rusty Bailey stepping into the Mayor's Challenge. Due to the large geographic size of the county, the initial focus in the County was on ending veteran homelessness in the City of Riverside. Once the effort was piloted in the city, the initiative was expanded to the entire county.

OVERCOMING OBSTACLES

In their efforts to achieve functional zero, Riverside encountered and overcame several obstacles:

- **Large geographic size and population.** Riverside County is one of the largest counties in the United States, with over 7,200 square miles, with many rural and desert areas. The county is larger than 3 states. In addition, it is one of the most populous counties, with 28 cities and over 2.4 million persons. To end veteran homelessness across such a large area, community leaders decided to focus first on one city within the county: the City of Riverside.
- **Resistance to Coordinated Entry System (CES).** Early on, some organizations resisted participating in the county-wide CES, wanting to control their own agency's process for assessing and assigning housing to homeless veterans. As those who were initially opposed to CES observed how it worked and saw the benefits of having a single, consistent approach to assessing the needs of individuals they eventually embraced the county-wide effort.
- **Some key volunteer leaders and staff were unable to commit to the goal.** As the community was incorporating the achievement of the goal into their work, some volunteers involved with CES and the BNL struggled to adopt the goal. To confront this challenge, Riverside continued to demonstrate the effectiveness through data reviews, educational discussions, collaborative engagements and ongoing success stories at every meeting or gathering.
- **Leadership of the actual work shifted due to the length of the event and needed resurgence.** Additional leaders committed to the work and set the work as a priority until the achievement goal was met.
- **Momentum surges and wanes.** Once the goal was adopted county-wide, stakeholders began making real progress. Over time, however, stakeholders became fatigued and progress periodically slowed. To overcome this challenge, new Leadership began re-energizing the movement. Leadership initiated: strategic team building activities; specific short-term and achievable goal setting within the long-term goal; demonstration of progress in unique graphs and charts, data reviews; holding celebratory moments in weekly meetings to build enthusiasm; and fun expressive ways to boost morale and encourage laughter through, for instance, "superhero" awards, formal recognition and speeches.
- **Community tragedy affected momentum.** The San Bernardino county terrorist attack deeply affected the community and agencies that serve the veterans between the two counties. Families and programs were deeply affected and various emotional impacts surged within the group. As the attack took place near the VA offices and hospital, veterans with Post-Traumatic Stress Syndrome (PTSD) issues began struggling, including homeless veterans as well as veteran who were staff on the initiative. Using basic disaster response techniques and motivational unity building activities, the group was able to shift the emotion into an impetus for action.

MID-COURSE IMPROVEMENTS

Riverside needed to make several adjustments to stay on course:

- The community needed and regularly focused on an expressed vision to unify the teams across the large county working on the ending veteran homelessness. Riverside's vision was: "No veteran left behind on the streets".
- Additionally, at times staff felt overwhelmed by the size of the problem. To confront this, leaders shifted away from focusing on the large number of Veterans to be housed and encouraged each staff person to focus on the individual they were currently trying to serve, with the motto: "One Person - One Home at a Time." This focus was bolstered by setting shorter term goals.
- Riverside further underscored the importance of focusing on individual veterans by implementing a Housing Crisis Response approach.

WHAT MADE A DIFFERENCE

- **Tailored outreach.** Part of Riverside's success was related to tailoring their outreach efforts to best engage with veterans. Riverside's experience and data showed that virtually every woman on the streets had experienced trauma in their life, which makes them more vulnerable on the streets. Riverside was also aware that their Female veterans are more likely to become homeless than their male counterparts. Therefore, deploying female veterans to outreach to veteran females on the street became a critical intervention. Outreach teams that had no females would link with outreach and engagement teams that did to serve the female veterans. Riverside tailored other aspects of outreach as well, such as, for veterans resistant to VA involvement, leaders would assign a non-profit outreach and engagement team.
- **Navigation Council.** The Council, which meets weekly, consists of front-line staff that not only includes agencies traditionally involved in providing housing and services to homeless veterans such as the VA and COC- and county-funded agencies, but also law enforcement and probation. Leadership recognized that the outreach and engagement staff had the most difficult part of the work and needed regular, strong support. The weekly meeting became a rallying point. Elements that helped make this meeting effective included:
 - It is held every week in the same place and same time, with plenty of parking and in a room large enough to accommodate whoever comes. These simple factors make the meeting welcoming and accessible to those who might resist attending the meetings.
 - Riverside also limits the time of the meeting to 1.5 hours and tries to ensure every meeting is impactful.
 - Housing match does not occur in the meeting in order to help reduce the competition for housing among the agencies attending and to reduce the focus on "my client". By not using the meeting to match clients to specific units, there is a collaborative spirit of helping each other solve challenges for "our (not my) client". As trust between partners at the table grows, participants feel safe to ask for assistance when needed and hear other suggestions for their client.
 - In these meetings there is no such thing as failure. The Riverside team focuses on points of acceptance and points of resistance. Points of resistance (e.g., a repeated issue/response/habit) is a pivot point for the group to focus on and collaboratively resolve.
 - Finally, the leadership attending the Council also use this time to provide training opportunities and to insert suggestions and planning ideas, based on best practices. These suggestions are offered in bite size pieces that are directly relevant to a clients' situation. This approach allows staff to learn in a very hands-on manner.
- **Strong BNL.** Riverside county found that having a strong BNL was critical as well. The strength of the list was dependent on two key factors: consistency and collaboration! It was critical to have consistency in: data reporting, oversight and monitoring of the list, and in-service documentation (e.g., with consistent updates of the contacts, client

location and status of specific housing crisis). As for collaboration, to be accurate the list needs active collaboration from all parties across the geographic area.

- **Prioritizing veterans for all housing vacancies.** To secure enough housing for all of our homeless veterans required intentional prioritization. As Riverside was bearing down on the goal, they prioritized veterans for every housing option available, including COC-funded and turnover Section 8 vouchers. The public housing agency (PHA) took the lead and the others, including COC-funded agencies, followed.

AFTER ACHIEVING FUNCTIONAL ZERO

Riverside County achieved functional zero on November of 2016, with the official designation in January 2017. Riverside continues to employ all of the above strategies, including the ongoing weekly Navigation meetings. Riverside is now using all of these best practices to lead the way in ending Chronic Homelessness, youth homelessness and all of the populations Riverside serves. Riverside continues to meet as a COC collaborative partnership as well to develop our goals and policies for sustaining in the future.

WHAT ARE THE BIGGEST THREATS TO SUSTAINING FUNCTIONAL ZERO?

- **Veterans coming from other areas.** Riverside County is the only community in the region to have achieved an end to veteran homelessness. Veterans from other cities and states have been contacting the local VA and other providers, seeking housing in Riverside, due to the County's success. As a result, Riverside outreach workers are beginning to find an increasing number of veterans on the streets of Riverside County coming from other areas. (It is important to recognize that upon seeing this development, Leadership began expressing to the front line staff a need to not panic, but to trust the process, to remember the effort is not about the numbers and to focus on the individual veterans they encountered. As Riverside began to review its data in depth, they identified that the intakes of new veterans were extremely high and began to specifically to learn more about them: who the veterans were, their unique barriers, where they were from, the length of time in the county and how they came to Riverside county. This information will help the stakeholders identify how best to serve the individuals while ensuring that all of the actual Riverside County residents receive priority.)
- **More Veterans on the Point-in-Time (PIT) count than on the BNL.** The PIT count released in Feb 2017 showed more homeless veterans than were on the BNL. This could suggest there were homeless veterans in the county that have not been engaged. (To address this, Riverside stakeholders have held multiple collaborative outreach events to ensure contact with all homeless veterans. In the course of reaching out Riverside found that a number of persons self-identified as veterans were, in fact, not veterans and are now being appropriately identified. Additionally, there were veterans who had previously refused to admit to having a veteran status now willing to identify as veterans due to their beginning to trust that a system might help them. As Riverside delved further, Riverside is documenting whether veterans are coming from other areas and is considering developing a local housing preference so that homeless veterans from Riverside will be prioritized while continuing to house every homeless veteran. Additional data review showed that the list was slowing due to a larger than normal number of individuals being unable to located anywhere in our county when navigators attempted to follow-up. So eventually, assuming they had returned to their previous locations, had self-resolved with housing or had moved on to other areas, Riverside identified those individuals as inactive on our list.)
- **Low vacancy rates and high housing costs.** The rental vacancy rate in Riverside is just 2%. The Fair Market Rent for a 1-bedroom unit is \$926. With the multiple individuals coming from other areas and our Riverside veterans, Riverside identified through data review, that one reason for the increase in individuals on our list, was that amount of time to move into a unit had increased dramatically, therefore individuals were not exiting homelessness housing as quickly as before.

WHAT WOULD HAVE BEEN GOOD TO HAVE KNOWN EARLIER?

- Don't wait, wondering when might be the best time to formally announce and start achieving the goal. Jump in and start figuring it out and to keep moving.
- The need for officially designated and sustained leadership. The leaders of this effort already had busy, full-time jobs. Over time they tended to lose momentum and ability to continue committing a significant amount of time over months and now years.
- Have all stakeholders recognize and embrace early on the value of having a Quality BNL to measure progress.
- To accomplish something as large as ending veteran homelessness requires breaking the goal into concrete steps and accomplishing each one.
- Don't be overwhelmed with the aggregate number of homeless veterans in your community. Focus all staff on housing, using the motto: One veteran at a Time - One Home at a Time.

HOW HAVE EFFORTS ON VETERAN HOMELESSNESS IMPACTED YOUR WORK?

- The efforts in Riverside on ending Veteran homelessness, now allows them to focus on using all Riverside has learned to tackle ending chronic, family and youth homelessness.
- The veteran initiative has built strong community relationships that will help Riverside confront the increasing housing crisis and lack of affordable housing.