

**COMMISSION TO STRENGTHEN AND ALIGN SERVICES PROVIDED TO MAINE VETERANS**  
**127<sup>th</sup> Maine Legislature – Interim 2015**

**Brief Summary:**

**Addressing the problem of homelessness among veterans by the State of Connecticut**

*Provided by Danielle Fox, Office of Policy and Legal Analysis*

In August of 2015, Governor Malloy issued a press release stating that Connecticut became the first state in the nation to end chronic veteran homelessness. Eighteen months earlier, the state had publicized its plans to reach that goal, recognizing the fundamental role housing plays in a person's ability to function normally in society and in particular, the link between housing and finding and maintaining employment.

The press release cites the coordinated leadership of the Reaching Home Veterans Workgroup – a collaboration of agencies and organizations at the federal, state and community level.

- US Department of Veterans Affairs (VA)
- CT Department of Housing
- Connecticut Heroes Project
- US Department of Housing and Urban Development
- CT Supportive Services for Veteran Families
- Connecticut Coalition to End Homelessness
- CT Depart of Veterans' Affairs
- Partnership for Strong Communities

*These groups worked in partnership with community-based provider of housing services.*

The primary resource cited for providing veterans with a permanent home is Department of Housing and Urban Development vouchers under the HUD-Veterans Affairs Supportive Housing program (HUD-VASH). The program connects the rental assistance program in HUD with case management and clinical services administered by the VA. State of Connecticut veteran housing vouchers supplemented the program. Beyond a veteran's receipt of VA services, additional outreach efforts by volunteers and service organizations, played a key role in connecting veterans with rental assistance according to several news reports.

Connecticut invested almost a billion dollars for affordable housing, generally, in the state. As an addition to that investment, CT also provided \$600,000 for grants to place employment specialists and job developers with state and local housing agencies. These grants are designated so the employment specialists and job developers will actively seek opportunities for veterans to reenter the work force.

The initiative also provided funding to increase the availability of security deposit assistance for veterans who are homeless.

Victory Gardens, a 74-unit affordable housing complex on land leased from the VA on the grounds of the VA Connecticut Healthcare System – Newington Campus, also received additional funding for supportive services for at-risk veterans and their families. Victory Gardens was one of

# Maine State Housing Authority

MaineHousing  
VASH Program

The Housing and Urban Development — Veterans Affairs Supportive Housing Program (HUD-VASH) run by MaineHousing shows that collaboration between federal agencies and public housing authorities can bring hope, health, and housing to homeless veterans.

In 2009, there were more than 450 homeless veterans in Maine. The majority were between the ages of 31-64 and were homeless between one week and one month. In tracking this homeless population, we learned that when they leave shelters very few move into good, stable housing situations. Too often, they are caught in situations that make it virtually impossible for them to secure any type of housing.

That leads to situations like that of “John,” a veteran who spent 35 years abusing drugs and alcohol and who lived for eight years in homeless shelters from North Carolina to Maine.

Now, thanks to HUD-VASH, he is living in decent housing and is clean and sober.

The HUD-VASH program combines Housing Choice Voucher (HCV) rental assistance for homeless veterans with case management and clinical services provided by the Veterans Affairs Medical Center (VAMC). This combination of housing and services provides these homeless veterans with a way out, and an opportunity for a better life.

MaineHousing was awarded 35 VASH vouchers in May, 2008. Under the program, homeless veterans must be referred to MaineHousing by caseworkers at the Togus VAMC in Augusta, Maine.

When the program started, staff from MaineHousing and Togus held several meetings and worked hard to understand the different aspects of the program and make it work for Maine’s veterans.

In the initial program rollout, referrals for VASH came from the medical center, but the veterans were not eligible to use the voucher until case management was in place. Rather than place a hold on the housing, MaineHousing assisted the veterans through our regular voucher process by giving them a homeless preference.

Once the VA hospital was able to hire case managers, the referrals started coming to us. We work with the case managers to move the veterans into secure housing as quickly as possible.

In order to assure a successful tenancy, here are the steps we follow:

- We provide applications, checklists, and essential documents to the VAMC.
- We obtain referrals (completed applications) from VAMC.
- We obtain homeless verification, and suitability for the program, from VAMC.
- We do a sex offender background check only (other criminal background screening is not applicable).
- Under certain conditions, veterans can transfer their VASH housing voucher to other communities within Maine or to another state.

- The voucher term must be for 120 days initially, with extensions permitted.
- The VA caseworker must approve the unit as suitable for the tenant.
- The Public Housing Authority (PHA) conducts an housing quality inspection of the unit.
- Leases for less than one year are accepted.
- VAMC provides case management.
- VA recommends termination if tenant refuses needed services.
- Vouchers turned back in are used for new homeless veterans.

In addition to working with the VAMC, MaineHousing also has worked closely with the Portland Housing Authority, which was awarded 35 VASH vouchers in October, 2009. By then, MaineHousing had placed several veterans in Portland Housing Authority's jurisdiction.

We worked with Portland to transfer existing VASH participants and regionalize the administration. Again, this shows how a state PHA and a local PHA can work together with the VAMC and provide the best service possible to homeless veterans.

MaineHousing was awarded another 25 VASH vouchers in June, 2010, because of the success of the program.

In an effort to make the program even better, MaineHousing and the VAMC have developed a relationship with a Maine housing developer who has experience creating affordable rental properties under MaineHousing's Supportive Housing Program.

The developer has purchased and rehabilitated several properties and given a preference to VASH participants. This arrangement may also be successful if MaineHousing chooses to place project-based VASH rental assistance vouchers in properties.

While there is a waiver for some aspects of the eligibility requirements (such as income level, criminal background, and debts owed to housing authorities), these formerly homeless veterans are able to succeed due to the case management that is required and the willingness of Maine landlords to take a chance and help a veteran who has served our country.

A concrete example of how the VASH program works is illustrated by a homeless veteran who was present at the annual Togus "stand-down" veterans in October of 2008.

The veteran just started receiving social security disability, but was not receiving healthcare. The veteran registered at Togus and was referred to VASH. Once the veteran was admitted to the program, MaineHousing coordinated with the VAMC to swiftly process the VASH application and scheduled the briefing within a week.

The veteran was in his own apartment by the end of December, 2008. Once in housing, he has been consistent with his healthcare and working with his VASH case manager.

He followed up with veteran services regarding a VA pension that he filed for at the stand down. He was awarded his VA service connected pension at 100% one year later. Once the veteran was financially independent, he felt successful enough to return his voucher so that another homeless veteran would have the opportunity to get off the streets.

The veteran was very clear in saying that the housing provided by the Housing Choice Voucher, and the support provided by the case manager, made it possible for him to move from homelessness and reach his goals. The veteran now has moved on to follow his dreams.



# Effort afoot to end homelessness among Connecticut vets

By ASSOCIATED PRESS • 11/10/13 12:00 AM

HARTFORD, Conn. — While advocates say the number of homeless Connecticut veterans has declined somewhat in recent years, there's a new effort underway to try to eliminate homelessness among the state's veteran population over the next two years.

Last week, a wide-ranging coalition of groups ranging from homeless shelters to the Connecticut Department of Labor agreed to a statewide action plan. It was the result of six months of brainstorming and research. By filling in gaps in services and better coordinating existing resources — including a recent boost in federal funding for veteran's housing programs — advocates are optimistic the roughly 400 homeless veterans on a single night in Connecticut can all have housing by the end of 2015.

"If we were to really try to reach and do what is right by veterans, which is that no veteran should be homeless, that's going to require a really strong, achievable plan with strong recommendations," said Greg Behrman of Fairfield, founder of the Connecticut Heroes Project, an initiative focused on

combatting homelessness among veterans. He also helped to spearhead this effort to come up with an action plan.

"A plan would allow us to do something extraordinary," Behrman said. "I think that we now have the most detailed, the most actionable state plan in the country."

Lisa Tepper Bates, executive director of the Connecticut Coalition to End Homelessness, said she's optimistic that homelessness among Connecticut veterans can be eliminated. She said the good news is that there are now adequate federal resources, such as supportive housing for veterans with high needs and homelessness prevention funds. In 2009, the Obama administration announced the goal of ending homelessness among veterans in the U.S. by 2015.

"In Connecticut, we actually do have the resources," she said. "We've just got to actually put them to use."

Besides the federal programs, the state launched various initiatives aimed at helping veterans, such as offering tax credits to companies as incentives for hiring a veteran. There are also various job training programs and grants to defray training costs. But for many veterans, especially those suffering from mental health or addiction issues, it can be a confusing maze to navigate, said Juliet Taylor, a former chaplain assistant and staff sergeant in the U.S. Army who now works as a support employment specialist at the Veterans Administration.

"There is no one place you have to look," said Taylor, who recently helped a man register for VA services 30 years after he left the military.

Taylor found herself on the verge of homelessness in 2009 after she suffered a serious medical problem and was honorably discharged. Taylor, a single mother of three who served nine years in active duty, including an 18-month combat tour in Iraq, had to rely on friends and her mother for help. Next week, Taylor is set to move in to her new home in Bridgeport, part of Habitat for Humanity's "Habitat for Heroes" program. She is Habitat's first "Veterans Build" homeowner in Connecticut.

"If someone doesn't have a home, doesn't have a job, they're not going to be able to function," Taylor said.

The Partnership for Strong Communities last year called for ending chronic homelessness and homeless veterans in Connecticut by 2017. But Nichole Guerra, a policy analyst, said the group didn't have a clear path to reach that goal until approached by Behrman's group. Now, she said, it appears that goal can be reached two years earlier.

"There are a lot of resources available for this population," she said. "It's just a matter of coordinating them more efficiently and doing a better job of outreach and connecting veterans to the services that they need."

Some highlights of the action plan include the creation of a safety net to return a homeless veteran to a stable home within six weeks and a revolving loan fund to provide money for security deposits. The plan also calls for working with the Department of Correction to develop a halfway house for veterans and creation of more permanent housing for veterans by converting unused state property.

The plan also calls for a Veterans Opportunity Fund that agencies can use to hire additional employment specialists to help veterans and the organization of a network of veterans who are employers committed to hiring and supporting homeless and at-risk veterans, helping with their transition to the private sector. It also calls for the production of a one-page brief that veterans can bring to job interviews. It will detail the incentives available for hiring veterans and the liability of hiring National Guard members and reservists.

Aaron Jones, a member of the Army National Guard who served 10 years active duty, works as the veterans outreach coordinator for the South Park Inn, a nonprofit agency in Hartford that provides temporary and long-term housing and supportive services to the homeless, including veterans.

While he welcomes the focus on helping homeless veterans, he questions whether the problem can be fully eliminated, especially considering the mental health and substance abuse problems many of the veterans, both young and old, are facing.

"Is it every going to go away? I don't know," Jones said. "I don't think homelessness will ever be solved. Having a goal is good. But it's one of those things. When we hear that goal, it's something you work toward."