

Serving the Needs of the Homeless
Veterans

Request 12: VA's plans to address
homelessness in Los Angeles area during
the cares process



76. Overview of Programs for Homeless
Veterans at West Los Angeles (May 15, 2006)

VA Programs for Homeless Veterans at VA Greater Los Angeles Healthcare System: An Overview of the Comprehensive Homeless Center

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Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to provide an overview of the history and current scope of services for homeless veterans at the VA Greater Los Angeles Healthcare System (GLA) through its Comprehensive Homeless Center. It addresses six key questions.

- 1. What is the history of VA homeless programs at GLA?**
- 2. How many veterans are affected by homelessness and where are they?**
- 3. What are the causes of veteran homelessness?**
- 4. What is being done to help those veterans who are or will become homeless? And relatedly, how does the VA work with the public and private sector to help veterans?**
- 5. What impact are we making on veteran homelessness at GLA?**
- 6. What's in store for the future?**

1. What is the history of VA homeless programs at GLA?

In the early 1990s, VA Greater Los Angeles faced a crisis over its lack of care for homeless veterans. At the VA West Los Angeles Medical Center campus, encampments of homeless veterans dotted the perimeter of the grounds. Veteran advocacy groups staged protests demanding the VA provide shelter and other services for the homeless.

Like other veterans, homeless patients received standard inpatient medical and psychiatric care at GLA. This "one size fits all" approach had limitations. First, homeless veterans frequently used scarce inpatient beds for shelter, tying up valuable medical center resources. Second, homeless veterans who really needed inpatient medical and/or psychiatric care had few housing options after medically-necessary stays were completed. This could promote extended stays in inpatient care as VA discharge planning staff scrambled for temporary housing

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arrangements. Worse, inpatient care sometimes leads to discharge back to homelessness (Nakashima et al. 2004).

Finally, many homeless veterans had problems the VA had not historically addressed: temporary housing needs, unemployment, and lack of social ties/support. These social problems – especially when combined with chronic medical problems and mental illness – promoted a revolving door life for homeless veterans between VA inpatient wards and the streets. Since the streets were no place to recover from acute illness, many veterans were re-admitted to the hospital shortly after discharge.

In order to address these needs, VA created partnerships in the late 1990s with private organizations whose mission was dedicated to help homeless veterans with their housing, drug treatment, vocational rehabilitation, and other psychosocial needs. Thanks to VA funding mechanisms like the VA Grant and Per Diem program, GLA now has over 1000 transitional housing slots for homeless veterans at community programs. More about these programs will be described later in this paper.

2. How many veterans are affected by homelessness and where are they?

- Each year, VA asks the coordinators of VA homeless centers nationwide to estimate the number of homeless veterans in their service area. In FY 2005, the total number of homeless veterans on any given night in the U.S. was estimated at nearly 194,254. Approximately 11% of this estimate 21,424 individuals are in the service area of VISN 22 (CHALENG, 2005).

The following are characteristics of the homeless veteran population served by GLA in FY 2005 for October 1, 2004-August 31, 2005.

- Half (50%) served in the U.S. Armed Forces after the Vietnam era. This includes 11% who served during the First Gulf War era.
- The average age is 50.
- 98% are men
- There is ethnic diversity among homeless veterans: 57% are Black/African American, 30% are White, 10% are Hispanic, and 3% are Asian/Pacific Islander, American Indian and other.
- About 1000 have been homeless for one year or longer.

3. What are the causes of veteran homelessness?

Dr. Robert Ely, former Mental Health Director at VA Greater Los Angeles, has stated: "While there's no one reason for why a vet becomes homeless, we believe it's often about an impaired, isolated individual with multiple mental health and medical disorders who struggles to function – often in an impersonal urban environment." The characteristics of individuals intaked at GLA for FY 2005 highlights the difficulties homeless veterans face:

- *Mental health/substance abuse problems are common.* Sixty-four percent (64%) indicated a substance abuse problem; 48% of these had a serious psychiatric disorder (e.g., psychosis, mood disorder, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder).
- *Medical problems are also reported.* Over half (52%) reported at least one serious medical problem. Serious medical problems include dental, back/neck problems, hearing loss, and liver problems (cirrhosis, hepatitis).
- *A significant number of minorities self report that they had been exposed to combat.* Seventeen percent (17%) had seen combat.
- *Social support is limited.*
- 11% are currently married.
- Sixteen percent (16%) are disabled or retired.
- Veterans with low or limited income are vulnerable to increasingly higher rents. For example, nearly half (46%) of individuals in Los Angeles County, pay more than 30% of their gross monthly income for rent (U.S. Census, 2000).

4. What is being done to help those vets who are or will become homeless? And relatedly, how does the VA work with the public and private sector to help veterans?

Greater Los Angeles (GLA) VA Medical Center's Comprehensive Homeless Center has many components:

- Active outreach to homeless veterans at homeless congregating areas like Skid Row, shelters, and rescue missions. VA also helps sponsor and staff Stand Downs at sites in Bakersfield and Ventura California. GLA has an outreach team which actually goes into the Los Angeles County Jail.

Staff help develop a discharge plan for interested inmates to secure VA homeless services upon release.

- Access to VA outpatient and inpatient medical care.
- Access to VA outpatient and inpatient substance abuse treatment.
- Access to VA opioid substitution services.
- Access to VA mental health outpatient and inpatient treatment programs including special programs for veterans with dual diagnosis or PTSD.
- Access to vocational rehabilitation or job-finding services. These include a Compensated Work Therapy (CWT) program run by VA, as well as programs by private agencies that are paid for by the VA.
- Access to priority VA pension claims review. At VAs in San Diego and Los Angeles, there is a designated homeless claims coordinator. Since homeless coordinators were installed in 2002, claim resolution time has decreased from 6 months to 1 month for non-service-connected claims, and from about 5 months to 3 months for service-connected claims (Personal communication, Peter Dougherty, Director of Homeless Programs, VA Central Office, October 14, 2003).

In particular, VA is very proud of the transitional housing resources it has developed at GLA for two reasons:

1. VA has secured over 1000 transitional housing beds set aside for homeless veterans at GLA.
2. As described earlier in this paper, these beds have been created through a partnership between VA and private housing agencies throughout Southern California. Partner agencies include Salvation Army, United States Veterans Initiative, and New Directions. In FY 2005, VA Central Office gave GLA and its partnership agencies \$8.47 million to house homeless veterans and hire agency staff and VA staff to oversee the agency housing programs.

Such partnerships are in keeping with the current VA philosophy in regards to serving homeless veterans – that is that “no single agency can do it alone.”

5. What impact is VA making on veteran homelessness at GLA?

- In Fiscal Year 2005, 6,354 homeless veterans were served by GLA (received medical care, mental health care, substance abuse treatment, and/or housing).

- For Fiscal Year 2005, there were 1,419 treatment episodes in our Grant and Per Diem Transitional Housing Programs. Of these episodes, 83% ended with the veteran being domiciled at discharge. This means being discharged to independent housing or a secure institutional arrangement (e.g., half-way house). Also, 34% of the discharges ended in the veterans being employed. In terms of patient satisfaction, 89% of veterans surveyed (n=565) said the quality of services at their GPD program was good to excellent; 94% said they would recommend the program to another veteran or friend.
- Inappropriate use of scarce VA inpatient resources by homeless veterans has declined. For example, at VA Greater Los Angeles, the average length of stay in medical and psychiatric inpatient dropped 28% and 35% respectively between Fiscal Years 1994 and 1998 -- primarily the result of having transitional housing alternatives for homeless veterans (McGuire & Mares, 2000).

6. What's in store for the future?

Future Challenges: shifts in the homeless veteran population.

- GLA's homeless program is seeing an average of nine homeless veteran families a month. At GLA, we are trying to address this issue by coordinating our efforts with community homeless agencies that work with families.
- VA homeless staff is seeing more homeless veterans 65 and older. They represent anywhere from 5 to 10% at VA Homeless programs at GLA. To address this issue we are making more referrals to state veteran homes. We also have a new program for older adult homeless through a partnership with Volunteers of America.
- VA is funding programs targeting other sub-populations of homeless veterans with specific needs. There are now housing and treatment programs women, and chronically mentally ill. One example is the "Collaborative Initiative to Help End Chronic Homelessness" (CICH), a joint project between GLA and community nonprofit partners servicing the Los Angeles Skid Row area. CICH offers immediate permanent housing ("Housing First") and intensive case management to chronically mentally ill homeless who have not traditionally done well in a structured treatment program.

Final thoughts

VA is committed to help homeless veterans regain their health, rebuild their relationships with family and friends, and secure employment and stable housing.

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VA wants its veterans to ultimately return to their rightful place in society as respected and productive citizens.

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U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2003). Bush Administration Announces \$75 million to provide permanent housing, medical care, job training, and other services to chronically homeless. News release. October 1, 2003.

Appendix: Data on GLA's Homeless Veterans, Program Outcomes, and Recipients of VA Grant and Per Diem Grants for Housing

Table 1: Estimates of Homeless Veterans at GLA's Service Area and Number of Veterans served in VA homeless programs for FY 2005 (October 1, 2004-August 31, 2005):

Sources: Community Homelessness Assessment, Local Education and Networking Groups (CHALENG) for Veterans (2005), Department of Veterans Affairs (2005b).

VA Medical Center	Estimate of Homeless Veterans in Service Area	Number of Veterans Served at VA Homeless Programs
Greater Los Angeles	*21424	6354

*It is estimated there are 21,424 homeless veterans total in the service area shared by VA Greater Los Angeles Healthcare System and VA Long Beach Medical Center.

**Table 2: Characteristics of Homeless Veterans Intaked at GLA's Comprehensive Homeless Center, FY 2005 (October 1, 2004-August 31, 2005):
Demographics.**

Source: Department of Veterans Affairs (2005a).

VA Medical Center	FY 2005 Intakes	Average Age	Male	Black	White	Hispanic	Other
Greater Los Angeles	3182	49.5	98%	57%	30%	10%	3%

Table 3: Characteristics of Homeless Veterans Intaked at GLA's Comprehensive Homeless Center in FY 2005 (October 1, 2004-August 31, 2005): Marital Status, Disability Status, History of Homelessness, and Service.

Source: Department of Veterans Affairs (2005a).

VA Medical Center	FY 2005 Intakes	Married	Disabled	Homeless 1 Year or More	After Vietnam Era	Gulf War Era Only	Combat Exposure
Greater Los Angeles	3182	11%	16%	21%	39%	11%	17%

Table 4: Characteristics of Homeless Veterans Intaked at GLA's Comprehensive Homeless Center in FY 2005 (October 1, 2004-August 31, 2005): Medical, Mental Health and Substance Abuse Problems.

Source: Department of Veterans Affairs (2005a).

VA Medical Center	FY 2005 Intakes	Serious medical problem	Substance Abuse Problem	Psychiatric Problem	Dual Diagnosis
Greater Los Angeles	3182	52%	64%	48%	38%

Table 5: Outcomes from GLA Grant and Per Diem Residential Programs for Homeless Veterans for FY 2005 (October 1, 2004-August 31, 2005).

Source: Department of Veterans Affairs (2005a).

VA Medical Center	FY 2005 GPD Participants	% Domiciled at Discharge*	% Employed at Discharge
Greater Los Angeles	1419	83%	34%

* Domiciled means independent housing or in secure institutional arrangement (e.g., transitional housing, half-way house).

Table 6: GLA Grant and Per Diem Residential Programs for Homeless Veterans for FY 2004 (October 1, 2004-August 31, 2005): Patient Satisfaction.

Source: Department of Veterans Affairs (2005a).

VA Medical Center	FY 2005 GPD Participants	Quality of Services Good*	Recommend to friend**
Greater Los Angeles	565	89%	94%

*Percentages reflect respondents who indicated services were good, very good or excellent (other possible answers: fair, poor).

**Percentages reflect respondents who indicated they would yes, definitely/yes, probably recommend treatment facility to another veteran or friend (other possible answers: no, probably not; no, definitely not).

Table 7: List of GLA Partner Agencies that Provide Grant and Per Diem Transitional Housing

Agency	Program Name	Beds
California Council for Veterans Affairs, Inc.		23
LA Family Housing Corporation	PDO Valley Shelter MOVE Program	30
LA Family Housing Corporation	Valley Shelter VITAL Program	30
Mary Lind Foundation		62
New Directions, Inc.	For Women	12
New Directions, Inc.	New Directions North	50
New Directions, Inc.		128
P.A.T.H.	PDO	10
P.A.T.H.	Westside	5
People in Progress, Inc.	PDO	20
Salvation Army	Hospitality House	15
Salvation Army	Naomi House	15
Salvation Army	Harbor Light	75
Salvation Army, A California Corporation	Samoshel	15
Salvation Army	Bell Shelter	50
Salvation Army	The Haven	95
Single Room Occupancy Housing Corporation	PDO Russ Hotel	36
United States Veterans Initiative, Inc.	High Barriers	18
United States Veterans Initiative, Inc.	Fathers Program	35
United States Veterans Initiative, Inc.	, Veterans in Progress	100
Veterans Assistance Foundation, Inc.	Veterans Haven I	32
California Veterans Assistance Foundation		9
Volunteers of America Los Angeles, Inc.	Ballington Plaza	102
Weingart Center Association		100