

In August 2013, Mayor Michael Nutter accepted the Mayor's Challenge to bring an end to veterans experiencing homelessness in Philadelphia. At that time, the challenge in Philadelphia was to house 1051 veterans that were believed to be homeless.

Today, November 2015, the PhillyVetHome team has housed 1309 veterans who were experiencing homelessness. PhillyVetsHome, a collaborative venture of the City of Philadelphia, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and the U.S. Veterans Administration (VA) with non-profit partners, now reports that there is been more than a 100% decrease in the number of unsheltered veterans in two years and two months.

Today, in Philadelphia there are no longer hundreds of unsheltered veterans, but 22 unsheltered veterans – most of whom are moving forward with a housing resource plan. About 12 persons may remain unsheltered because they are refusing housing. However, at the point that the person decides they want housing, the housing resource is available. This is called functional zero.

About Philly Vets Home 2015: This is an unprecedented collaboration between federal, local and non-profit agencies aimed at ending Veteran homelessness in the City of Philadelphia, including the United States Department of Veterans Affairs, United States Department of Housing and Urban Development, City of Philadelphia Office of Supportive Housing, Philadelphia Housing Authority, City of Philadelphia Department of Behavioral Health and non-profit agencies such as Veteran Multi-Service Center, Project HOME, Impact Services Corporation, UESF, Neighborhood Housing Services (Fresh Start), Pathways to Housing PA, Philadelphia Mental Health Association, and Homeless Advocacy Project. Visit PhillyVetsHome.org for more information

PhillyVetsHome partners unanimously attribute this progress to unprecedented collaboration.

I am pleased to share some of the comments from our partners:

“HUD is proud to be a partner in this amazing collaborative effort that is building momentum every day,” said Jane C.W. Vincent, Regional Administrator of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's Mid-Atlantic region. “Significant progress has been made because of our commitment to collaboration and our shared goal of providing housing for those men and women who have served to protect our freedom and way of life.”

PHA President and CEO Kelvin Jeremiah agreed, “To be able to partner with other city agencies and like-minded partners to meet the great need for affordable housing in Philadelphia is undoubtedly a good thing. The success of this partnership is measured by the number of Veterans and their families who now have a home and a bit more stability.”

“Our commitment as partners to eliminate homelessness for those men and women who have proudly served this country is becoming a reality,” said Dan Hendee, director of the Corporal

Michael J. Crescenz VA Medical Center. “Working together, as a community, helps us to ensure that systems are in place to support all veterans who may experience a housing crisis or need assistance.”

Mayor Nutter has noted that “Our original commitment was effectively to end homelessness among veterans in Philadelphia before Veterans Day 2015,” said Mayor Nutter. “On November 11th, veterans experiencing homelessness in our great city will be rare, brief and non-reoccurring. As the birthplace of our Nation, Philadelphia has an obligation to our veterans, who defended our homes, to help them secure appropriate housing.”

When asked about the how Philadelphia has been so successful, the PhillyVetsHome coalition explained the level of commitment has led to days when sixteen Veterans were housed simultaneously in a single day. One Veteran stood out on that day, because his new home brought with it a new lease on life. Charles Bouges, an Army Veteran housed through the HUD-VASH program, first rode to Northeast Philadelphia to see an apartment, but it was the airport nearby that rekindled his long lost plan. During his 17 years of service in the Army, he worked on helicopters and yearned to be a pilot. Now, after finding stability in his new home, his aim is to get a pilot’s license –it’s only a matter of time before he will soar over Philadelphia.

Philadelphia has gone beyond the four corners of the Mayor’s Challenge and has housed veterans who did not qualify for all the benefits from the Veteran’s Administration. This may have been due to a dishonorable discharge or some problem with service records. To date, Philadelphia has housed 61 individuals who met this definition.

The system and process of how the partners have organized the work is unique. There is one point of entry into a housing and support system for any veteran experiencing homelessness in Philadelphia. Formerly homeless vets are employed as peer navigators and visit vets experiencing homelessness – even those living on the street – on a sometimes twice or three times weekly basis to establish trust. There are shared housing resources among the partners. Vets are reviewed weekly on a by-name list so that everyone knows who spoke with and who saw a specific person most recently.

Two weeks ago a homeless veteran with six children was living in her car. A victim of domestic violence, this Vet could no longer remain with friends and Philadelphia’s Emergency Housing System did not have space for a family of this size. With the combined resources of the City of Philadelphia and the local Veteran’s Administration partnership as well as a non-profit support partner, this family was housed in record time; homeless on Monday; 4 nights in a hotel and then into a four bedroom apartment on Friday. Support staff from the VA was not able to provide furniture and furnishings by Friday, but moved the family in with sleeping bags.

The core of this success are the organizations and agencies who put the veteran at the center of the work, dropping barriers and most of all establishing trust that the work is not about any organization or agency but about the veteran.

There will be homeless vets in the future, but the resources and system exists that will ensure that any vet experiencing homelessness will be rare, brief, and non-recurring.

There is a culture of YES in Philadelphia:

- our partners are truly ALL IN and ALL TOGETHER to end Veteran homelessness –
- our efforts are sharpened every day by the lessons we learn from working together with the community
- we are inspired by how Philadelphia can demonstrate a culture of “YES” in the face of every challenge and opportunity
 - we are part of a movement of communities saying YES
 - Saying YES, we can end Veteran homelessness
 - Saying YES, we can ensure that every Veteran and his or her family can thrive in a home of their own – every Veteran
 - YES, we can find new ways to work together, across agencies, across all levels of government
 - YES, our work is strongest when we put people experiencing homelessness, not programs, at the center of our work.

This is the strength of the Philly Vets Home collaboration and all of its partner agencies that have worked tirelessly together. YES, that work is made even stronger through public-private partnerships like the leadership of public agencies like the Philadelphia Housing Authority and the Mayor.

Ending homelessness is not rocket science. If we can end homelessness among Veterans, we can end homelessness for every American – for every one of our neighbors who has been sleeping outside for years or even decades and for every family that does not know if they have a safe place for their children to stay tonight and for every young person with no place to call home, so vulnerable to victimization on the path to adulthood.

Join us!