



Testimony of the

Department of Military and Veterans Affairs

Senate Veterans Affairs & Emergency Preparedness and Urban Affairs & Housing Committees

Joint Hearing on Veteran Homelessness

July 26, 2022

Brigadier General (PA) Maureen Weigl

Deputy Adjutant General for Veterans Affairs

Good morning, Senator Stefano, Senator Muth, Senator Pittman, Senator Saval, and members of the Senate Veterans Affairs Emergency Preparedness and Urban Affairs Housing Committees. Thank you for discussing Veteran homelessness and the Department of Military and Veterans Affairs' (DMVA) role in advocating and supporting the efforts of federal and state agencies to reduce Veteran homelessness in Pennsylvania to functional zero.

While DMVA is the lead agency to assist Veterans within the Commonwealth, DMVA is not the lead agency in addressing homelessness. We provide coordinating support, resources, and assistance in the effort to reduce homelessness among Veterans. We do this through several programs, the Veterans Trust Fund (VTF), Veterans Temporary Assistance Program (VTA), and the Military Family Relief Assistance Program (MFRAP). These programs support organizations that assist Veterans in distress. The funding for these programs comes from generous donations from caring Pennsylvanians. To make a donation Pennsylvanians visit www.mfrap.pa.gov and they can contribute to the VTF when renewing their driver's license. There are no state appropriated funds used to source these programs.

DMVA has created support resources and coordinates efforts through the Governor's Advisory Council on Veterans Services (GAC-VS) and PA VETConnect. The GAC-VS is a collaborative of state agencies and organizations that administer or support Veterans programs and services in the Commonwealth. Together this group has created a compilation of Veteran programs and works collectively to improve them while identifying program support gaps and taking steps to address any unfilled needs. PA VETConnect has expanded DMVA personnel support into our communities, creating support networks and a resource tool that assists Veteran advocates in referring Veterans to programs, services, and organizations that can fulfill their

needs. Through the GAC-VS and PA VETConnect, DMVA leverages the knowledge and resources of other government agencies and non-profits to support homeless Veterans.

Much of the support and services the DMVA provides are to our federal, state, and community partners, including the United States Veterans Administration (VA), their Veterans Integrated Service Network 4 (VISN 4), the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development-Veterans Affairs Supportive Housing (HUD-VASH), the Department of Labor (DOL), the United States Interagency Council on Homelessness (USICH), the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), the Department of Community and Economic Development (DCED), the Department of Corrections (DOC), the Department of Human Services' Office of Mental Health and Substance Abuse (OMHSAS), Continuums of Care (CoCs), the County Directors of Veterans Affairs (CDVA), Veterans Service Organizations (VSOs) and several notable community non-profit organizations.

While many Veterans are thriving and easily integrating into civilian society, unfortunately, some remain vulnerable because of their military experiences, disabilities, behavior health, or bad choices, which may lead to other social deterrents of health and ultimately homelessness. Our nation, state, and communities have created partnerships, programs, and services to address these issues, but homelessness continues to be challenging. One thing is clear; it takes collaboration, resources, and community involvement to make a difference, and DMVA leads in coordinating this effort. The State Veterans Commission is also looking at what policy recommendations they collectively may be able to offer to address Veteran housing insecurity.

The way that homelessness is calculated is through a Point-in-Time (PIT) Count and Housing Inventory Count (HIC). The HIC is categorized into five program types: emergency

shelter, transitional housing, rapid re-housing, safe-haven, and permanent supportive housing. According to the latest available PIT Count data from January of 2021, a total of 782 Veterans were identified as homeless in the Commonwealth: 724 were identified in emergency shelter and transitional housing locations, and 58 were identified as unsheltered (living on the street, in cars, under bridges, etc.). The COVID-19 pandemic greatly impacted the ability to count unsheltered homeless individuals correctly, so we estimate the actual number of homeless Veterans is higher. The PIT Count is a tool regarding homelessness but should not be relied upon as the sole indicator of Veteran homelessness.

Homeless Veterans staying with friends or relatives temporarily are considered “housed” under the current homelessness definitions by HUD. However, these situations can change overnight, and individuals may find they suddenly do not have a guaranteed shelter. Individuals leaving institutions (such as hospitals or jails) where they have resided for 90 days or more must spend one night homeless before they qualify for more robust homeless services like rapid re-housing and not just homeless prevention assistance.

DMVA continues to work with our community partners such as Veteran’s Place of Washington Boulevard, Veterans Multi-Service Center, the YWCA of Greater Harrisburg, and many more across the Commonwealth to address housing-related concerns for our service members, Veterans, and their families (SMVF).

Progress in Veteran Homelessness in the Past Decade

Governor Wolf signed on to the Mayor’s Challenge to End Veteran Homelessness in September 2015. Since that time, Veteran homelessness has decreased overall by 29% based on the PIT count in 2020 before the start of the pandemic. Eight communities and CoCs in Pennsylvania have effectively ended Veteran homelessness according to the criteria and

benchmarks set forth by the USICH. This means that Veteran homelessness in these communities is rare, brief, and non-recurring.

CoCs are homeless assistance planning networks at the city, county, and state levels and coordinate efforts to identify needs, resources, and gaps in service for local homeless populations. Pennsylvania is divided into 16 CoCs, which seek to address all aspects of homelessness and the needs of those experiencing homelessness. The CoC's are usually formed around large population centers, can be regional, and may have political exigencies to consider. Counties can choose to become part of the larger CoC or choose to be an entitlement CoC. VISN 4 acknowledges that Pennsylvania is unique in how the CoCs are formed. The attachment geographically portrays how the CoC's are formed within the Commonwealth and highlights the VISN 4 catchment areas and the providers within each of the CoCs, including the entitlement CoCs. The Eastern and Western PA CoCs are known as the Balance of State and comprise 53 counties; these two CoCs are jointly grant-funded. The remaining 14 counties are each their own Entitlement CoCs who receive grant funding individually. The CoC's are supported and grant-funded by HUD through DCED; collectively, they create a network of supportive housing programs and support services throughout Pennsylvania.

DMVA receives no funding to combat Veteran homelessness; however, through the Office of Veterans Affairs (OVA). We administer grants through the VTF to organizations that address housing insecurity and underlying issues. The OVA also manages the VTA and the MFRAP, which assist Veterans with emergent housing-related issues and referrals to other governmental and community agencies' resources.

The DMVA leads two programs that allow collaboration with multiple federal entities, sister agencies, and community partners regarding homelessness in Pennsylvania. PA

VETConnect is a community-based outreach program to connect Veterans and families who need assistance with resources. The GAC-VS is the Commonwealth's first interagency collaborative approach to Veteran's services. Through these successful programs, DMVA has increased awareness and engagement with current challenges and successes related to the Veteran homelessness sector.

PA VETConnect allows DMVA to concentrate on delivering services from within the communities Veterans live in and utilizes community-based providers to fill gaps in services. In short, DMVA is building stronger relationships with Veteran advocates, promoting awareness of their programming, and connecting Veterans to available and validated services and programs.

PA VETConnect is becoming a trusted channel among Veteran advocates for gaining increased awareness of and connection to Veteran-centric and mainstream resources that can assist Veterans. Regional Program Outreach Coordinators (RPOCs) and Veterans Services Specialists (VSSs) are identifying and participating in all relevant meetings or calls addressing Veteran homelessness within their coverage areas. In February 2021, DMVA and DCED executed the necessary memorandum of understanding for RPOCs to begin participating in By-Name List meetings for the Eastern and Western PA Continuums of Care. Notably, during the fiscal year 2021-2022, our RPOCs have responded to over 60 requests for resources to address housing insecurity or homelessness, accounting for approximately one in every five resource requests received. PA VETConnect has identified over 230 resources across the Commonwealth that address transitional housing in some capacity.

In southwest Pennsylvania, OVA's Programs, Initiative Reintegration, Outreach (PIRO) Bureau has initiated a training session between the Veterans Leadership Program and the County Directors of Veterans Affairs in Southwest & Northwest Pennsylvania and portions of Central

Pennsylvania to explain and review the resources that Veterans Leadership Program has for SMVF. We connected with the Local Housing Options Teams in Cambria, Somerset, Westmoreland, Allegheny, Washington, and Greene counties and on distributions for the Southwest and South-Central Regional Homelessness Advisory Boards.

Additionally, public health officials have recognized a link between suicides and homelessness. For a more holistic approach, in a partnership with VA and SAMHSA, Pennsylvania is also participating in the Governor's Challenge to prevent suicide among SMVFs. Suicide rates linked to stress doubled between 2005 and 2010. During this same time, the country had historically high rates of foreclosures, including foreclosures on rental properties. This has had a lasting effect on the current state of suicides and homelessness. We need to ensure mental health resources are available, given the ongoing public health crisis and economic factors affecting us all. The Governor's Challenge team is focused on three priority areas:

- Identify SMVFs and screen for risk.
- Improve access to mental health and behavioral health services.
- Increase lethal means safety and safety planning.

Two complementary efforts that our regional outreach staff is integrally involved with are:

- Northwest Pennsylvania Veteran Suicide Prevention Program: A partnership with the University of Pittsburgh's Program Evaluation and Research Unit for suicide prevention implementation within a 15-county region using a \$3.7M Center for Disease Control grant. Our 5-year implementation plan covers the period of 2021 thru 2025.
- Together with Veterans (TWV): Northeastern Pennsylvania faces some of the highest rates of Veteran suicides in the Commonwealth. In

collaboration with Carbon County, DMVA has also adopted the TWV model—a community-based suicide prevention program that partners rural Veterans with community agencies. DMVA has expanded this TWV model to Greene County and Cambria County.

VISN 4, which covers 63 of Pennsylvania's 67 counties, works directly with all federal VA Medical Center Homeless Veteran Care Teams to assist VA-eligible Veterans. Fortunately, Veterans who may not qualify for assistance through the VA may still be able to obtain help with homeless issues. Supportive Services for Veteran Families (SSVF) and HUD-VASH are two flagship VA programs utilized to permanently house Veterans. The HUD-VASH program combines Housing Choice Voucher (HCV) rental assistance for homeless Veterans with case management and clinical services provided by the VA. The VA also announced their Permanent Housing Placement National Challenge will permanently house 38,000 Veterans in 2022. Each VA location will receive data on the number of Veterans they are tasked with housing. In April, the VA highlighted VISN 4 as leading the way with 7 of 9 facilities on pace with the 2022 goal.

The VISN 4 catchment area is represented in Attachment 3. As you can see, VISN 4 includes Wilmington Delaware in its catchment area, and this is one of the two facilities behind on the stated goal, when talking about the Commonwealth status we can exclude the Wilmington statistics. Philadelphia County is the last county in Pennsylvania that is behind its stated goal. Philadelphia faces a unique set of challenges including; substance use disorder, chronic homelessness, lack of suitable housing options, and declining landlord participation all have an adverse impact on the homelessness condition in Philadelphia County. That said, Philadelphia County is only 3% away from meeting its stated goal in this National Challenge. Pennsylvania is the 2nd highest completion percentage in the country and leadership from VISN 4 are confident

that Pennsylvania will meet its stated goal. Still, Pennsylvania must bring awareness of this program to landlords to encourage the acceptance of the vouchers. Stakeholders share that landlord engagement is a challenge across the Commonwealth and that current economic conditions and reduced availability of housing options are contributing to fewer landlords accepting HUD-VASH vouchers.

In 2022, twelve non-profits received over \$16 Million (\$16,189,386) from the federal VA through SSVF grants. These grants assisted 2,578 Veteran households or over 3,800 individuals. Of these households, 1,402 received Rapid Rehousing enrollments, meaning household members were literally (Category 1) homeless, and 1,176 received Homeless Prevention enrollments, meaning these households were imminently at risk for becoming homeless if not for the intervention from the SSVF provider. Some SSVF grantees also operate the Homeless Veteran Reintegration Program (HVRP), administered by the DOL. This program aims to reintegrate homeless Veterans into meaningful employment, and as of July 1, 2021, seven HVRP grants were active in Pennsylvania.

The GAC-VS has formed two workgroups related to homelessness. The Hard-to-Place workgroup focuses on establishing support networks to reduce the occurrence of Veteran homelessness following reentry from incarceration and assisting those who are considered hard-to-place due to a criminal record.

Currently, OVA is also leading discussions with the DOC and OMHSAS on how we better meet the housing needs for justice-involved Veterans returning to the community. DMVA intends to provide referrals, support, system linkages, and knowledge of the Veteran culture.

The Affordable Veteran Housing workgroup is relatively new but focuses on the lack of available units and the need to engage landlords, so they choose to rent to Veterans. Landlords

can obtain higher rent amounts with non-HUD-VASH tenants, so landlord engagement is crucial for developing a support network.

The GAC-VS Women Veterans committee is engaged in addressing women-specific issues as the workgroups deliberate. We must collectively develop more solutions for women Veterans experiencing homelessness, especially when they have children in their care.

DMVA also supports the Department of Human Services' (DHS) Fairweather Lodge Program, which helps people reintegrate themselves into the community. The goal is to provide emotional support, a place to live, and employment for its' members. The program was developed by Dr. George Fairweather in California in 1963 based on of extensive experimental research. In his studies, Dr. Fairweather found that people with serious mental illness are less likely to return to the hospital when they live and work together as a group rather than live and work individually. His research also showed that the Lodge Program helps people stay in the community longer, provides more employment opportunities, and costs less than conventional treatment programs. Because of the success of the original groups, the Community Lodge Program has expanded considerably during the past 25 years, and there are now Lodges across the nation.

DMVA continues to support the efforts of DHS and the community providers in placing Veterans into these lodges through community engagement and awareness (PA VETConnect). Additionally, as mentioned, we collaborate with DHS and DOC to assist justice- involved Veterans. Part of that effort is working with our federal partners to determine if we can utilize HUD-VASH vouchers for a lodge placement, thereby providing the Veteran with a home plan rather than experiencing homelessness.

DMVA hosted a virtual town hall on July 13, 2022, focused on Veteran housing needs. Bill Reed, Director of Veteran Services, Harrisburg YWCA; and Micah Snead, Co-Chair, Homeless Veteran Committee, GAC-VS, were on our panel. We discussed the federal VA SSVF program, Pennsylvania CoCs, and Veteran homelessness initiatives within the Commonwealth. Our next virtual town hall will be on September 13, 2022, and we will focus on Veterans' transportation needs. Transportation remains a concern for many older Veterans, especially in rural Pennsylvania.

Veterans Trust Fund and Support

Generous Pennsylvanians fund the VTF by voluntarily making a \$3 donation when applying for or renewing their driver's license, photo ID, or motor vehicle registration. Additionally, the VTF receives proceeds that come from the sale of the Honoring Our Veterans and Honoring our Women Veterans license plates or private donations. Since the grant program began in 2013, DMVA has awarded \$5,332,860 to organizations serving Pennsylvania's Veterans.

- Veterans Leadership Program of Western PA, Pittsburgh (Allegheny County): \$36,267 for services to prevent homelessness among Veterans
- Center for Community Action, Everett (Bedford County): \$28,635 to provide services to homeless Veterans and their families
- AHARI – A Home is a Right, Inc., Philadelphia (Philadelphia County): \$50,000 for the AHARI WRAP program to serve homeless and at-risk Veterans
- Safe Harbor Easton, Easton (Northampton County): \$25,000 to provide housing services to Veterans

- Veterans Brotherhood, Pennsburg (Montgomery County): \$29,000 to provide housing services to Veterans

We encourage all Pennsylvanians to consider donating (donate.dmva.pa.gov) to the VTF to support these homeless programs and other projects supporting our Veteran's community.

Challenges

Many challenges exist regarding Veteran homelessness, which often results from a combination of drug or alcohol use and co-occurring behavioral health issues that can include Post Traumatic Stress, Traumatic Brain Injury, and poly-Trauma. These conditions make it difficult to find and maintain gainful employment to pay for housing. By percentage, women Veterans are at a higher risk of homelessness compared to their male counterparts and face additional challenges when they must care for children. Other challenges exist when individuals facing homelessness have larger families to care for, have pets, or are members of the National Guard or Reserve Components who were never federally activated, meaning that they will not qualify for SSVF assistance or other housing programs offered under the VA.

We must continue to uncover more resources for National Guard or Reservists who were not federally activated under Title 10 and therefore do not qualify for SSVF or other Veteran homeless programs. According to the Eastern PA CoC Veterans Leadership Engagement Committee (VLEC), from May 2021 to June 9, 2022, within the 33 counties of the Eastern CoC, there were 66 National Guard members and Reservists who called into Coordinated Entry as street homeless requesting homeless assistance and identified themselves as Veterans. Twelve of these 66 individuals identified as female. None could access SSVF or other VA homeless programming due to lacking one-day active-duty service.

Housing instability affecting the older Veteran population, women Veterans or Veterans caring for children, and Veterans who have a companion animal, need to be considered when developing plans for emergency shelter beds, transitional housing, and creating more affordable, accessible housing.

We must also continue to encourage property owners to consider HUD-VASH vouchers and develop strategies to find mutually beneficial paths for those offering housing and those seeking housing.

We must broaden or relax the definition of homelessness and the criteria that assists these individuals to allow for more wrap-around support and cause less trauma in an already traumatic situation.

Finally, we must increase awareness of various programs to improve service delivery and available resources for homeless Veterans.

Conclusion

Thank you, Maureen. As you have seen today, DMVA leads the way in a coordinated effort to tackle Veteran homelessness. We attempt to take an inter/intra-agency approach through federal, state, and local governments while leveraging non-profit organizations to support and assist homeless Veterans. We encourage all our stakeholders to continue collaborating to share data, identify gaps, and create strategies to address unmet supportive service needs for Veterans. Increasing access to case management to support triage services for homeless Veterans will allow for a quicker response once these situations are identified. **We ask for support to help expand the awareness of existing programs for homeless Veterans and assistance in researching and providing additional funding for Veteran homelessness programs. PA**

VETConnect is the department's pathway to addressing these needs and more. No service member or Veteran should be left behind.

We look forward to taking your questions.

Definitions and Overview

Before we get into the details on what DMVA's Office of Veterans Affairs (OVA) is doing to contribute to the reduction of Veterans Homelessness some key definitions are needed.

Homelessness – HUD has established four categories in which an individual or family may qualify as homeless.

Category 1 - Literally homeless individuals/families Individuals and families who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence, which includes one of the following:

- Place not meant for human habitation
- Living in a shelter (Emergency shelter, hotel/motel paid by government or charitable organization)
- Exiting an institution (where they resided for 90 days or less AND were residing in emergency shelter or place not meant for human habitation immediately before entering institution)

Category 2 - Individuals/families who will imminently (within 14 days) lose their primary nighttime residence, which includes ALL of the following:

- Have no subsequent residence identified AND
- Lack the resources or support networks needed to obtain other permanent housing

Category 3 - Unaccompanied youth (under 25 years of age) or families with children/youth who meet the homeless definition under another federal statute and includes ALL of the following:

- Have not had lease, ownership interest, or occupancy agreement in permanent housing at any time during last 60 days
- Have experienced two or more moves during last 60 days
- Can be expected to continue in such status for an extended period of time because of chronic disabilities, OR chronic physical health or mental health conditions, OR substance addiction, OR histories of domestic violence or childhood abuse (including neglect) OR presence of a child or youth with a disability, OR two or more barriers to employment

Category 4 - Individuals/families fleeing or attempting to flee domestic violence, dating violence, violence, sexual

assault, stalking, or other dangerous or life-threatening conditions that relate to violence against the individual or family member and includes ALL of the following:

have no identified residence, resources or support networks

Lack the resources and support networks needed to obtain other permanent housing

Functional Zero - means homelessness across a population is rare, and measurably so. In this state, fewer people are experiencing homelessness than are routinely accessing safe and stable permanent housing in a month.

The Continuum of Care (CoC) Program - is designed to promote communitywide commitment to the goal of ending homelessness; provide funding for efforts by non-profit providers, and State and local governments to quickly rehouse homeless individuals and families while minimizing the trauma and dislocation caused to homeless individuals, families, and communities by homelessness; promote access to and effect utilization of mainstream programs by homeless individuals and families; and optimize self-sufficiency among individuals and families experiencing homelessness.

The Point-in-Time (PIT) - count is a count of sheltered and unsheltered people experiencing homelessness on a single night

The Housing Inventory Count (HIC) - is a point-in-time inventory of provider programs within a Continuum of Care that provide beds and units dedicated to serve people experiencing homelessness.

Understanding CoC's structure

Many factors come into play and there are no set guidelines for how a CoC can or should be formed.

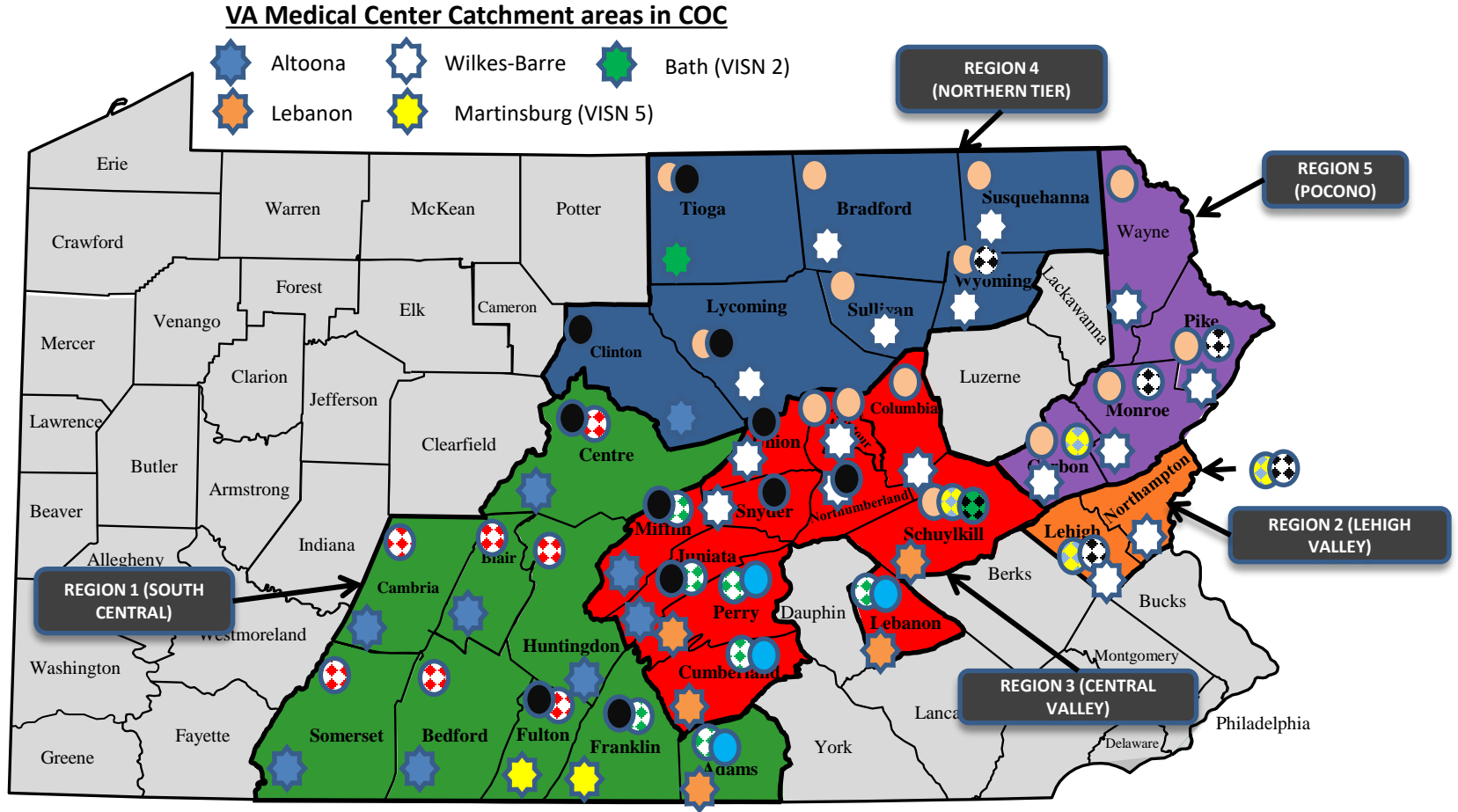
- Around large population centers
- Regionally (i.e. North/South/East/West, etc...)
- Based on political preferences

VISN 4 acknowledges that the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania is unique in how the CoCs are formed. There is a combination of the three examples in PA's CoCs structures.

The CoC's within Pennsylvania were formed more than 10 years ago and have not been adjusted since.

The maps on the following 3 slides portray how the CoCs are currently formed within the Commonwealth.

Regional County Distribution for PA Eastern CoC








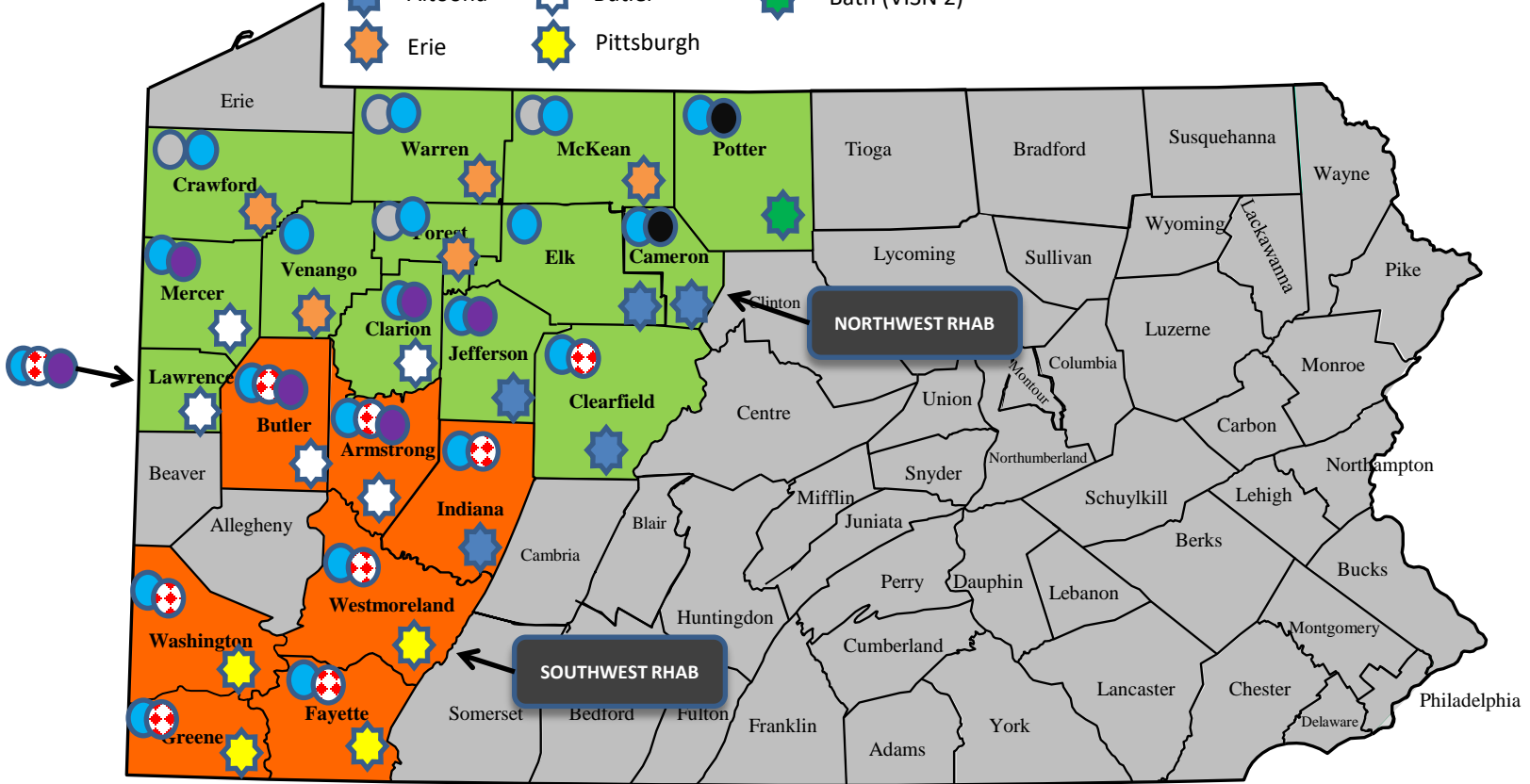
SSVF grantees

- | | | |
|--|---|---|
|  CEO |  VOA of PA |  Community Hope |
|  Veterans Multi-Service Center |  CC of Allentown |  Opportunity House |
|  YWCA of Greater Harrisburg |  VLP | |

Regional County Distribution for PA Western CoC

VA Medical Center Catchment areas in COC

-  Altoona
-  Butler
-  Bath (VISN 2)
-  Erie
-  Pittsburgh









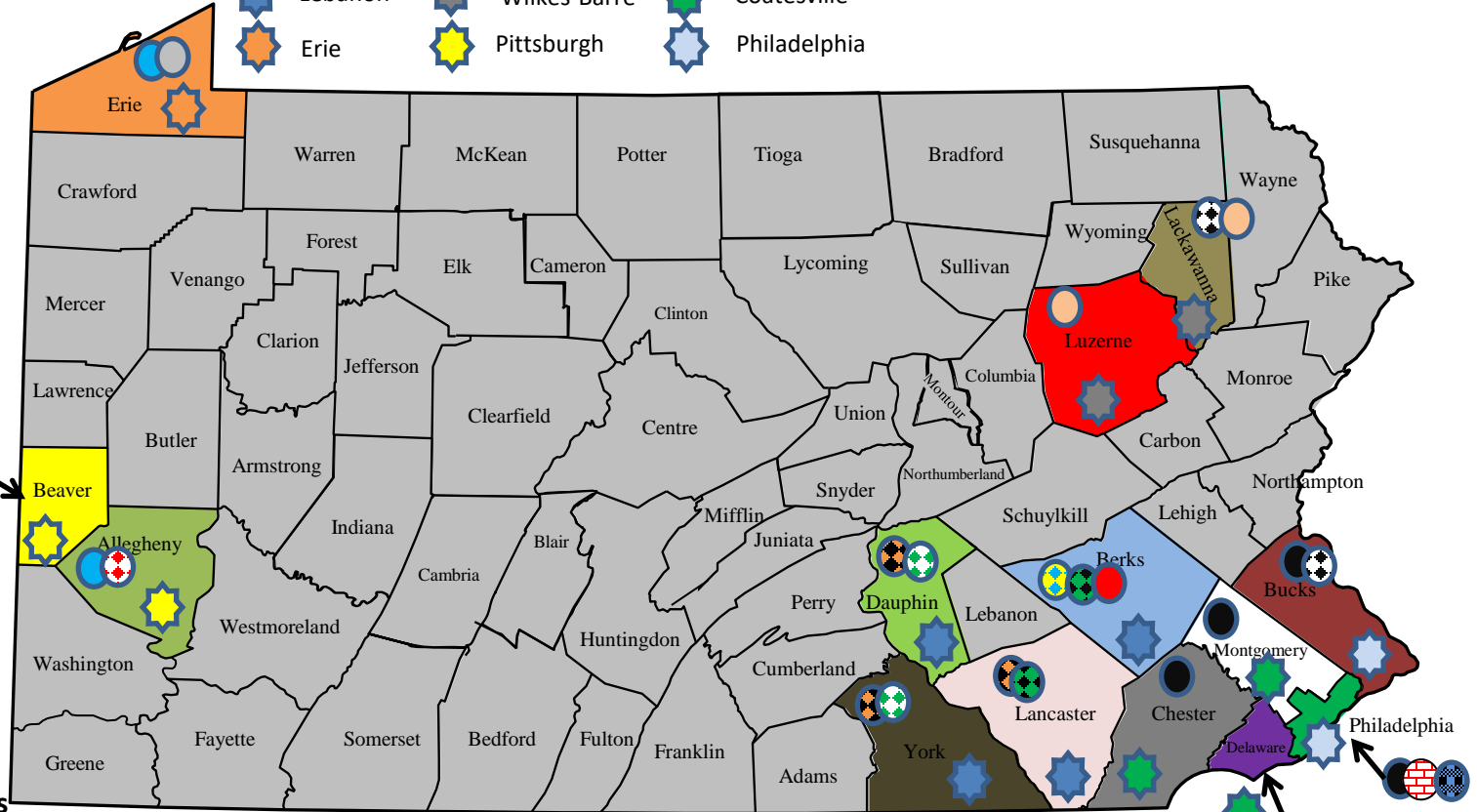
SSVF grantees

-  Soldier On
-  Chautauqua Opportunities
-  VLP
-  Veterans Multi-Service Center
-  Lawrence County CAP

Regional County Distribution for PA Entitlement Counties

VA Medical Center Catchment areas in COC

- | | | |
|---|--|--|
|  Lebanon |  Wilkes-Barre |  Coatesville |
|  Erie |  Pittsburgh |  Philadelphia |



SSVF grantees

- | | | |
|--|---|---|
|  Lehigh Valley CIL |  Project H.O.M.E. |  CAA of Delaware County |
|  Soldier On |  Chautauqua Opportunities |  Community Hope |
|  VLP |  Veterans Multi-Service Center |  Catholic Charities Allentown |
|  Lawrence County CAP |  CEO |  VOA of PA |
| | |  YWCA of Greater Harrisburg |
| | |  Opportunity House |
| | |  Utility Emergency Services Fund |

Pennsylvania
Permanent Housing Placement National Challenge Status

As of June 30,2022: 2nd Highest completion % in the country

VAMC	Goal	# Currently Housed	Percentage Completed
Altoona	66	41	62%
Butler	80	51	64%
Coatesville	219	136	62%
Erie	49	39	80%
Lebanon	250	159	64%
Philadelphia	344	161	47%
Pittsburgh	224	143	64%
Wilkes Barre	116	86	74%
Wilmington, DE	124	54	44%
VISN Total	1,472	870	59.1%
National Total	38,000	19,029	50.08%