Homeless in America:
Responding to the challenge of homelessness among veterans

Victor Carlson, Psy.D.
Chief, Homeless Services
VA New Jersey Health Care System
5 Distinct Periods of Homelessness in America

1. Colonial Times
2. Pre-Industrial Period
3. Post-Civil War
4. Great Depression
5. Contemporary Period (1980 to present)
Current Period of Homelessness (80’s+)

- Poor economy in 70’s and early 80’s (compounded by our current crisis)
- Shift from manufacturing to service
- Loss of affordable housing
- Significant unemployment
Limited Low Income Housing

- **22%** Without Housing
- Low Income Housing Stock

- 78 Units for every 100 in Need
- 22% Without Housing
Even Fewer Units Available

- 56% Without Housing
- 34% Used by Higher Income Tenants
- 44% Units available because...
107,000 Homeless Veterans in America

10 - 20% of Homeless are Veterans

- Veterans make up 11% of US population
- Only 2% of the Veterans are Homeless

4.5% of Homeless Vets are from households with children
Why Veterans

- Prolonged Separation from Supports
- Highly Stressful Training and Service
- Some Skills Don’t Translate Directly
- Difficulty Adjusting Back Home
Mental Health Needs of Homeless Veterans

- 66% Drug or Alcohol Abuse
- 54% Serious Psychiatric Illness
- 39% Dual Diagnosis
- 58% Health / Physical Problems
Legal and Credit Problems

Mounting debt during homelessness
- Unpaid Student Loans
- Back Taxes
- Unpaid Child Support while Unemployed

Unresolved Legal Issues
- Warrants and Suspended License

Garnishments drive veterans into the underground economy - “off the books.”
VA Five Year Plan to Eliminate Homelessness Among Veterans

1. Outreach / Education
2. Prevention
3. Treatment
4. Housing / Supportive Service
5. Income / Employment / Benefits
6. Community Partnerships
To Be Covered Today

- Traditional Strengths of the VA
- Bold New Initiatives
- Role of Psychology in the Future of VA
  efforts to end homelessness among vets
Traditional Strengths of VA

- State of the Art Treatments
  - Training, Research and Development
  - Empirically Supported Tx and Best Practices

- Vocational Rehabilitation
  - Compensated Work Therapy (CWT / ITP)
  - Supportive Employment

- Supportive Housing
  - CWT - Transitional Housing
  - Grant & Per Diem Transitional Housing
**Bold New Initiatives**

- **Outreach and Education**
  - Getting the word out
  - Meeting them where they are

- **Prevention Programs** (up stream)
  - Primary and secondary prevention

- **Permanent Housing** (down stream)
  - HUD-VASH \(\cong\) “Section 8 with Case Management”

- **Community Partnerships** (in every direction)
Outreach and Education

Taking it to the Streets
- Shelters
- Soup Kitchens
- Stand Downs
- Street Outreach

Getting the Word Out
- Media campaign regarding services
- VA National Homeless Call Center
Role of Psychologists in Outreach and Education

Articulate Spokespersons

- Highly developed conceptual skills - to frame the issues clearly and succinctly
- Well-honed communication skills - in writing and public speaking

Bring Credibility and Respect

- “Doctorate” communicates expertise
- Media outlets, public hearings, zoning boards
New Prevention Initiatives

HUD-VA Prevention Pilot
- Multi-site, three-year pilot project
- Providing early intervention to recently discharged veterans and their families

Supportive Services for Vets and Families
- Providing grants and technical assistance
- To non-profit organizations for services

Contract Emergency Housing
Criminal Justice Initiatives

Veterans Justice Outreach (VJO)
- Outreach and linkage services
- Early stages of the justice system
- Vet courts, drug courts, mental health courts
- Education and training to Law Enforcement

Health Care for Reentry Veterans (HCRV)
- In-reach to incarcerated veterans
- Transitioning out of the prison system
Role of Psychology in Prevention Programs - APA Div 27

- Expand “helping” beyond traditional psychotherapy to promote wellness.
- Develop, implement, and evaluate programs.
- Build collaborative relationships with groups and organizations to solve social problems.
- Consult with organizations and provide tools to build capacity to address social problems.
- Reduce social inequalities and empower marginalized people.
Restoring Our Capacity

- Preparing for Returning OEF/OIF Vets
- Uniform Mental Health Services
- Mental Health Enhancement Initiatives, e.g.
  - Adding Psychologists to Residential Care
  - Including Specialists (Addiction Psychologists)
Role of Psychology in Treatment of Homelessness

- Full range of psychological problems
  - Anxiety, Depression, PTSD
  - Substance Abuse
  - Serious Mental Illness

- Unique contributions of Psychologists
  - Differential Diagnosis of Serious Mental Illness
  - Neuropsychological Evaluations (TBI, etc)
Management of Information

- National Homeless Registry
  - Database to track and monitor homeless vets
  - A data warehouse for utilization and outcome

- Management Information System
  - “Dashboard” of program-specific metrics
  - Structural, process and outcome measures
  - Available monthly and quarterly
Role of Psychology in Research & Data Management

- Research Design
- Data Storage and Analysis
- Developing our knowledge of the causes, contributing factors, and effective interventions to end homelessness
Psychology Leadership

- Developing New Interventions
- Designing New Programs
- Training and Supervising Staff
- Administering Programs and Coordinating Complex Service Delivery Systems