



How the Gulfport/Gulf Coast Region Achieved an End to Veteran Homelessness

By Mary Simons, Executive Director, Open Doors Homeless Coalition

The Gulfport/Gulf Coast region of Mississippi is mostly rural with a few urban pockets and consists of six counties (Harrison, Hancock, Jackson, George, Stone, and Pearl River) and four entitlement cities: Biloxi, Gulfport, Pascagoula, and Moss Point. The mayors of Gulfport and Biloxi participated in the [Mayors Challenge to End Veteran Homelessness](#), and the region was confirmed as having effectively ending Veteran homelessness in December, 2015. The community was confirmed as ending Veteran homelessness through Zero: 2016 in January, 2016.

The region's population is 384,000 with a racial breakdown of approximately 65% white, 30% African American, 2% Asian, and 3% other. The population of people experiencing homelessness is roughly the same racial composition. Males over the age of 55 make up the largest group of individuals experiencing homelessness on the Coast. Family homelessness on the Coast mostly consists of families who have experienced domestic violence. Economically, Mississippi is one of the poorest states in the country and has high rates of poverty and unemployment. At the same time, in the August 2012 edition of the *Chronicle of Philanthropy*, Mississippi was named as the second most charitable state per capita. The primary employment in the region includes service/tourism jobs followed by government and military-related jobs.

The 2015 PIT indicated there were 411 people experiencing homelessness, most unsheltered, including 59 Veterans. The 2016 PIT indicated a drop in overall homelessness to 320, and a decrease in Veteran homelessness to 13. Of the 13, three Veterans were new to the area, two were newly experiencing homelessness, and the remaining were on our by-name list. Our Veteran population inflow is from local sources and also persons who have entered inpatient treatment at the Gulf Coast VA Medical Center from its catchment area, which stretches from Florida to Louisiana. At discharge, many Veterans who entered treatment from homelessness wish to stay on the Mississippi Gulf Coast and are linked to HUD-VASH vouchers and/or SSVF and housed. Altogether in 2015, 276 Veteran households experiencing homelessness were connected to housing and appropriate services based on the Veterans' choices.

Criteria 1: Gulfport/Gulf Coast region has identified all Veterans experiencing homelessness.

During the 2016 Point in Time Count, every person experiencing homelessness was counted and 84% participated in the VI-SPDAT triage assessment. The data from the PIT count was used to refresh the by-name list. We continue to conduct regular outreach efforts by the VA and SSVF providers along with weekly HMIS reviews. Through the regular review of HMIS data, our community identifies if someone is newly experiencing homelessness, if anyone returns to homelessness after being housed, or if someone on the by-name list has not been anywhere in the system in over 90 days. If the outreach workers, the VA, or SSVF need to locate someone, our HMIS review can help identify where someone may be staying or where he or she may eat lunch or take showers on a regular basis. Our community is confident that all Veterans experiencing homelessness are identified as quickly as possible and offered assistance as quickly as possible.

Criteria 2: Gulfport/Gulf Coast region provides shelter immediately to any Veteran experiencing unsheltered homelessness who wants it.

The shelter beds are very limited in our community. If a shelter bed is not available, the SSVF providers provide an opportunity for the Veteran to stay in a hotel until housing is located and available for move-in. Sometimes, a Veteran who is linked to a service provider and actively seeking housing will choose to stay in his or her campsite until housing is secured. At all times, the Veteran's choice is respected.

Criteria 3: Gulfport/Gulf Coast region only provides service-intensive transitional housing in limited instances.

We do not have GPD beds in the community. Periodically, if a female Veteran has experienced domestic violence, she may request transitional housing and services from the Gulf Coast Women's Center for Nonviolence. This is rare, but client choice is respected.

Criteria 4: Gulfport/Gulf Coast region has capacity to assist Veterans to swiftly move into permanent housing.

We are continuing to utilize the rapid re-housing components of SSVF and ESG, as well as HUD-VASH vouchers, to ensure that Veterans are able to move quickly into housing. On average, Veterans and their families are housed within 28 days. The median length of time from identification to housing is 13 days. Robust strategic prevention efforts through SSVF have been successful in reducing the number of Veterans who enter homelessness. Continued relationship building among landlords has been a key strategy in order to assure that there are units available for Veterans to move into.

Criteria 5: Gulfport/Gulf Coast region has the resources, plans, and system capacity in place should any Veteran become homeless or be at risk of homelessness in the future.

We are continuing to prioritize Veterans for housing options and continue to manage resources and system capacity to meet the need. Our Veteran committee continues to meet monthly to review and update the by-name list and address emerging needs of recently housed veterans. Extensive outreach continues through the VA and SSVF in order to quickly identify people newly experiencing homelessness. In addition, reviews of HMIS data ensure that our community can identify Veterans who may return to homelessness so they can be quickly re-housed. Prevention efforts have increased so that fewer Veterans experiencing homelessness in our area.

Our Top Three Strategies for Sustaining Progress

- 1) Monthly Meetings:** We (CoC, VA, PHA, SSVF providers) continue to meet monthly to go over the by-name list and ensure that each Veteran experiencing homelessness has been engaged and has a housing plan as quickly as possible. Through this process, we are continuing to house more Veterans than the average inflow of Veterans into homelessness monthly.
- 2) Prevention Funds:** We continue to focus on rapid re-housing, while ensuring that prevention dollars are spent when there is a high likelihood that the Veteran will fall into homelessness without the assistance. As a result of strategically using prevention funds from SSVF and ESG, fewer Veterans are experiencing homelessness. When a Veteran does become homeless, quickly re-housing the Veteran is a priority.
- 3) Strategic Use of HMIS:** Our HMIS administrator checks the system weekly for Veterans newly experiencing homelessness who have been identified through outreach, Veterans who have accessed services in the system, and Veterans who have returned to homelessness, in an effort to ensure that the by-name list stays up to date. Through HMIS, the HMIS administrator can let outreach workers know where to find a particular Veteran experiencing homelessness. For example, the Veteran may regularly shower and wash clothes at the day center or may eat lunch at a particular place each day. This enhances efficiency in the system.

Our Data (as of May 2016):

of Veterans currently on our by-name list: 7
 Six-month average monthly housing placement rate: 16
 Average number of days from identification to housing: 28.8
 Median number of days from identification to housing: 13
 Average monthly inflow: 8