



Understanding the Success of Chicago's Ending Veteran Homelessness Initiative

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About All Chicago:

All Chicago prevents and ends homelessness through emergency financial assistance, community partnerships, data analytics, training, and research. Learn more at allchicago.org.



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Ending Veteran Homelessness Initiative (EVHI) is an effort by local, regional, and federal partners to end and prevent homelessness among veterans in the City of Chicago through a coordinated, data-driven process. The initiative built off the momentum of multiple national efforts, including *25 Cities, Built for Zero*, and the *Mayor's Challenge to End Veteran Homelessness*, among other campaigns. Since its start in 2015, EVHI has led to a 28 percent reduction in veterans experiencing homelessness.

EVHI consists of multiple teams each structured to fulfill a specific purpose. The Leadership Team, made up of leaders from funding and coordinating agencies, as well as regional coordinators and federal representatives, is tasked with allocating resources, removing barriers, and monitoring progress. The Community Team offers critical insights from homeless service providers and identifies challenges. System Navigators and the Outreach Teams help implement the day-to-day tasks of locating and assisting veterans.

The initiative has fundamentally transformed the way that Chicago houses veterans and, ultimately, all people experiencing homelessness. Service providers, funders, and coordinators, such as All Chicago Making Homelessness History, are increasingly aligned in their efforts, using a coordinated entry process to match veterans to housing and ensure that they remain housed. Participants are also cooperating by sharing resources, such as housing choice vouchers, data, and staff time. With a centralized database and a By-Name List, data has a more prominent role in the system, helping drive decisions and track progress. The coordination, cooperation, and centralized data are indicative of the change in perspective from a project-centric focus to a system framework. Through EVHI, agencies better understand the full scope of the challenge and work together to implement solutions that will drive systemwide change.

These fundamental changes would not have been possible without the political support from the federal government and the City of Chicago, notably the Office of the Mayor, as well as the continued commitment of members of the Leadership Team, the Community Team, and the Homeless Management Information System (HMIS). EVHI led to more resources for housing veterans and produced efficiencies in the system. The initiative was not without struggle, however. Data-related issues created hurdles, particularly at the start of the initiative. The structure of EVHI also evolved after initial conflict. Stakeholders had to adjust to a culture of rapid change and experimentation. The process of creating partnerships and building trust required significant time investment and constant communication.

More work remains to be done through EVHI. Interviewees for this report propose some potential next steps and needs, including additional resources, even better coordination, and continued relationship-building with stakeholders in the shelter system and employment sector.

INTRODUCING EVHI

This report documents the story of the Ending Veteran Homelessness Initiative (EVHI), an effort by local, regional, and federal partners to end and prevent homelessness among veterans in the City of Chicago through a coordinated, data-driven process. This section chronicles the history of EVHI and introduces the initiative's structure and its members. Subsequent sections characterize changes EVHI has made to the process of housing veterans, provide insights into the drivers of the initiative, explore lessons learned, and list some potential next steps for EVHI.

METHODOLOGY

Information for this report was collected from interviews with 22 representatives from federal, regional, state, and local organizations. Interviews took place between September through November 2017. Interviewees were identified based on their participation in EVHI and referrals from other interviewees. A discussion guide used for interviews can be found in **Appendix A**. Data included in this report is from the Chicago Homeless Management Information System (HMIS).

HISTORY OF EVHI

EVHI is the culmination of multiple campaigns occurring simultaneously in the 2010s. Federal agencies in collaboration with the United States Interagency Council on Homelessness (USICH) sought to end veteran homelessness by 2015, eliminate chronic homelessness by 2016, end family and youth homelessness by the end of the decade, and ultimately end homelessness among all populations. With the weight of the White House and support of Congress, the Office of Veteran Affairs (VA), the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), and USICH launched *25 Cities*. Coordinated by the Rapid Results Institute, the initiative targeted cities with the largest number of people experiencing homelessness. The *Built for Zero* initiative (formerly Zero: 2016), coordinated by Community Solutions, and *Dedicating Opportunities to End Homelessness* (DOEH), led by HUD, also brought much-needed resources, housing units, and technical assistance to cities throughout the United States.

Chicago has been and continues to be engaged with each of these national initiatives. At the same time, Mayor Rahm Emanuel had signed on to the *Mayor's Challenge to End Veteran Homelessness*, a national campaign, in September 2014. The City backed their support by committing more than \$800,000 to fund permanent supportive housing units, case management, and rental subsidies.¹

In the spring of 2014, representatives from HUD, the VA, and USICH brought together leaders from the *25 Cities Initiative*. Afterwards, local leaders in Chicago came together with homeless service providers to introduce a new and coordinated process of housing veterans, as well as a new decision-making structure. Many interviewees cite January 2015 as the unofficial start of EVHI.

MEMBERS IN THE INITIATIVE

EVHI's structure is made up of three main bodies: the Leadership Team, the Community Team, and the System

¹ City of Chicago Office of the Mayor, 2014, "Mayor Emanuel Announces Plan To End Veteran Homelessness In Chicago By 2015," September 16. <http://bit.ly/2Au6nqp>

Integration Team. Two coordinating entities – the Outreach Team and System Navigation Team – are responsible for engaging with and directly supporting each veteran experiencing homelessness. Each team is made up of members who have a clear and direct role to play in furthering the team’s purpose. Membership in the groups has changed as needs and challenges became clearer or evolved. ²

LEADERSHIP TEAM

PURPOSE: The Leadership Team is tasked with making key policy and strategy decisions to ensure EVHI’s success. Members monitor progress, propose solutions or ideas, reallocate funding or other resources, and address challenges identified by EVHI participants.

MEMBERS: The Leadership Team is made up of funders and system-level coordinators with the ability to make real-time decisions and allocate resources. Leadership from the following agencies are members: City of Chicago Mayor’s Office; HUD regional office; Chicago Housing Authority (CHA); City of Chicago Department of Family and Support Services (DFSS); Corporation for Supportive Housing (CSH); Jesse Brown VA Medical Center; and All Chicago Making Homelessness History (All Chicago). Since the start of EVHI, the Leadership Team has added new members, including a representative from the Community Team, a representative on behalf of the city’s Supportive Services for Veteran Families (SSVF) programs, and a representative from Grant and Per Diem (GPD) programs.

“Recognize that everyone has a role to play in solving the issue and identify the roles to front line staff. ‘What’s your role? How do you define it? What does success look like?’ That has to be clear for everyone involved. And that is something that took time to clarify.” — Beverley Ebersold, Director of National Initiatives, United States Interagency Council on Homelessness

COMMUNITY TEAM

PURPOSE: The Community Team informs the Leadership Team of program and system challenges, provides critical feedback to proposals based on project and direct service expertise, and helps to implement strategies. The Team also has five sub-groups: an assessment group, which conducts and provides feedback to assessments; Grant and Per Diem (GPD) group, which represents the GPD programs; landlord engagement group, which works to increase units in the system; outreach group, to represent outreach needs; and the homelessness prevention group, which focuses on diversion and prevention.³

MEMBERS: Members are direct line staff from emergency shelters, transitional housing, outreach, and housing programs, including SSVF programs, HUD VA Supportive Housing (VASH) programs, and GPD programs.

SYSTEM INTEGRATION TEAM (SIT)

PURPOSE: SIT’s goal is to ensure that every veteran is housed appropriately. Through the By-Name List (also known as the One List), members of SIT conduct case conferencing on each veteran to make sure he/she can be located, assessed, and matched to a housing program. SIT members also discuss potential solutions when veterans have difficulty remaining in permanent housing and risk returning to homelessness (e.g., re-matching to another project, providing additional services).

MEMBERS: The Corporation for Supportive Housing (CSH), the system facilitator, leads SIT. Members also include

² More information about the structure, policies, and procedure for EVHI can be found here: <https://bit.ly/2jKUiA>.

³ The nature of the sub-groups will evolve in response to emerging needs. Changes are anticipated in 2018.

direct line staff from the outreach team, intake providers, emergency shelters, transitional housing projects, PSH providers including HUD VASH, the Community Referral and Resource Center (CRRC), and SSVF and GPD projects.

SYSTEM NAVIGATION TEAM (COORDINATED ENTITY)

PURPOSE: System navigators help veterans through the process of getting housed, from the point of being identified as experiencing homelessness to moving into permanent housing. At the request of projects, often for the most vulnerable veteran, navigators locate the veterans, help them get necessary documentation, transport veterans to appointments, and conduct other tasks to ensure that they are housed as quickly as possible and do not drop out of the process before getting housed.

MEMBERS: CSH subcontracts with three agencies for system navigation: FeatherFist, Volunteers of America Illinois, and Northside Housing. There are currently five system navigators.

OUTREACH TEAM (COORDINATING ENTITY)

PURPOSE: The Outreach Team conducts outreach with people who are experiencing homelessness in the city, visiting potential spots, such as viaducts, parks, and emergency shelters. Members can also assess veterans.

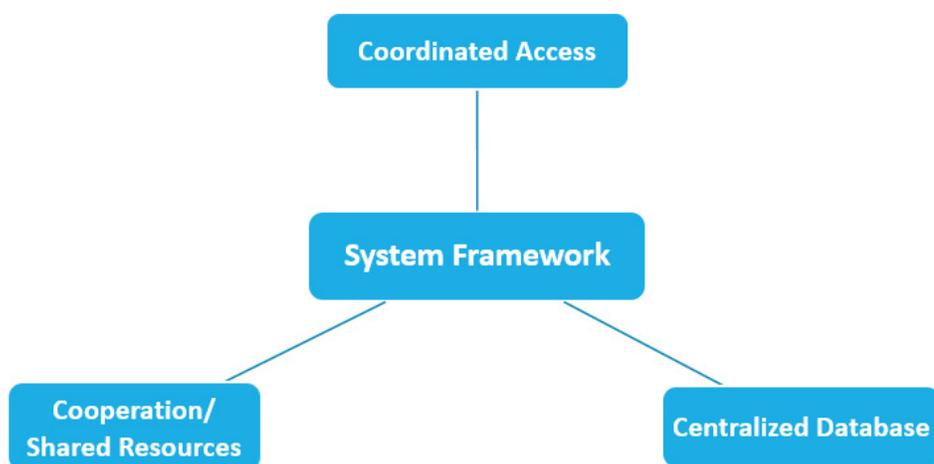
MEMBERS: The VA Community Resource and Referral Center leads the veteran-dedicated Outreach Team, and they also partner with other providers. Currently, there are two dedicated outreach staff.

NEW APPROACH TO HOUSING VETERANS

From high-level policy direction to day-to-day direct services, EVHI has fundamentally changed the way that Chicago houses veterans. Participating agencies now operate in a system framework, where staff across sectors and organizations work together for greater efficiency and effectiveness to prevent and end homelessness.

The system framework is implemented in a variety of ways. Veterans experiencing homelessness now go through a coordinated process to access housing and services. Funders, service providers, and coordinators cooperate and share more resources with each other as they focus on systemwide goals and collectively identify challenges and solutions. In addition, more agencies are entering information into a centralized database, HMIS. With more accurate and comprehensive systemwide metrics available, data has started to drive decision-making.

Graphic 1. Implementation of a System Framework



INCREASED COORDINATION: HOUSING VETERANS THROUGH A COORDINATED ENTRY PROCESS

NOW: EVHI ushered in coordinated entry to Chicago. Case workers now use a **standardized assessment** form to collect basic information to determine housing and service needs. Service providers connect with veterans in several ways: the **EVHI Outreach Team** may locate homeless veterans in the streets; a veteran may seek out a specific provider; or an emergency shelter or another provider may learn that a client receiving services is a veteran and connects the client with someone who can conduct an assessment. Based on the needs assessment, the person conducting the assessment may determine that the veteran is best served by their agency and “self-match” the veteran to one of their agency’s projects. If the agency does not “self-match,” a **central body for matching** (previously CSH, and now Catholic Charities) determines where the veteran should be housed, based on the assessment results.

BEFORE: Agencies connected with veterans independently through each agency’s outreach efforts, or if the veteran approached the agency. Because of funding requirements, agencies were often incentivized to house all veterans meeting basic requirements; veterans who did not meet the requirements could be turned away. Staff did not communicate often with case workers from other agencies, whether to discuss potential housing matches or challenges to staying housed.

INCREASED COOPERATION: SHARING RESOURCES AND BUILDING TRUST

NOW: EVHI can be credited with significant **silos-busting**.

Regular interactions, defined targets, and open communication have helped to foster a culture of increased cooperation. SIT members conduct **case-conferencing** about veterans, regardless of whose project the client is enrolled in. In addition, more agencies are putting client-level data into a **centralized database**; funders provide **housing resources** to be used by all agencies in EVHI; and staff from multiple organizations across different sectors **work collectively** to identify challenges, strategize, and host events. Specific project types, like the SSVF providers, speak with a **unified voice** within the initiative to better represent the needs of SSVF programs.

“This level of collaboration made things easier than it would have been if everyone was doing their own thing. It made it easier for the veterans, too. Before, veterans were calling around to multiple places and programs, trying to find the right fit on their own. This system allowed people to get to the right place, the right project, so they can get on the path to housing more rapidly.”

— Stephanie Sideman, Senior Program Manager, Corporation for Supportive Housing

BEFORE: Agencies shared the same goal of housing people experiencing homelessness, but they operated in silos, utilizing different approaches and aiming for different targets based on funding requirements. Service providers from different organizations did not case-conference together. Few agencies voluntarily put information into HMIS.⁴ Much like other agencies, SSVF providers functioned primarily in silos.

EVIDENCE-BASED PRACTICE: USING DATA TO DRIVE DECISIONS

NOW: The **By-Name List** (a.k.a. the BNL or One List) has the name of every veteran identified as experiencing homelessness in Chicago. The BNL, housed in HMIS, is the needle on the compass, guiding every member of the EVHI, from the direct service providers to the Leadership Team. The service providers look to the list for names of veterans to locate and assist. The Leadership Team reviews a **data dashboard** of system-level metrics at the start of every meeting to gauge progress. HMIS is now a more **comprehensive and higher quality database**, with more agencies inputting data in a timely manner.

“We would have the dashboard at the top of every meeting, and we would use the dashboard to drive the decisions we were making. The data became the driver of the work.” — Nonie Brennan, EVHI Leadership Team; CEO, All Chicago Making Homelessness History

BEFORE: Without the data infrastructure to look at the performance of the system, agencies only knew a sliver of the challenge before them. Before the BNL, and the rigorous setup of the HMIS, stakeholders were less certain of the number of people experiencing homelessness in Chicago. Estimates used algorithms that factored in the Point-in-Time (PIT) Count and other variables, such as the number of veterans coming into the system. Agencies did not have as much detailed information, such as rates of return to homelessness or length of time from intake to housing.

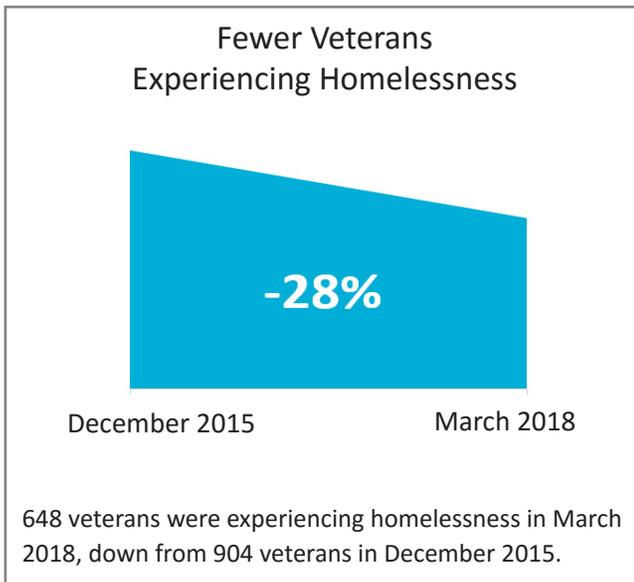
⁴ Agencies receiving HUD Continuum of Care (CoC) funding are required to input data into HMIS. Agencies not receiving CoC funding do not have this requirement, but are encouraged to share data nevertheless.

EVIDENCE OF SUCCESS

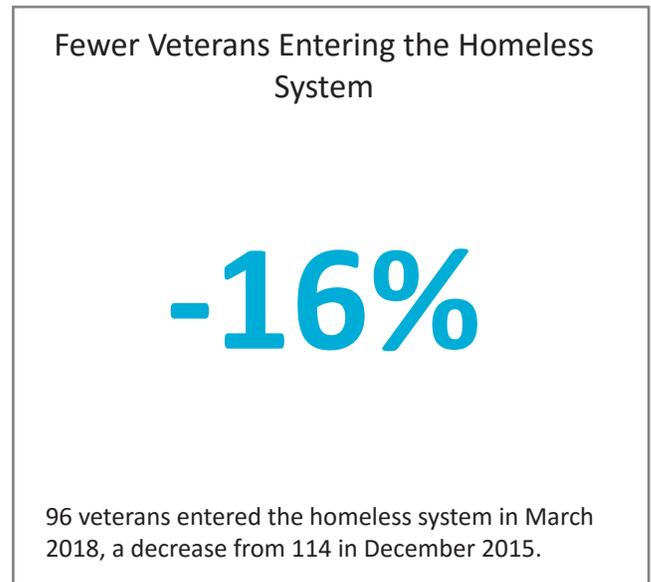
Between 2010 and 2016, the United States has reduced homelessness among veterans by 47 percent. Under EVHI, the City of Chicago has also had success, as evidenced by the HMIS data below (graphics 2 to 5). As of March 2018, the number of veterans housed in the last 90 days (194) was fewer than the number of veterans becoming homeless (325), indicating the system needs improvement in the federal benchmark on permanent housing capacity. The use of service intensive transitional housing is limited, with more veterans experiencing homelessness (325) than entering service intensive transitional housing (82).

Graphics 2 to 5: Progress in ending and preventing veteran homelessness

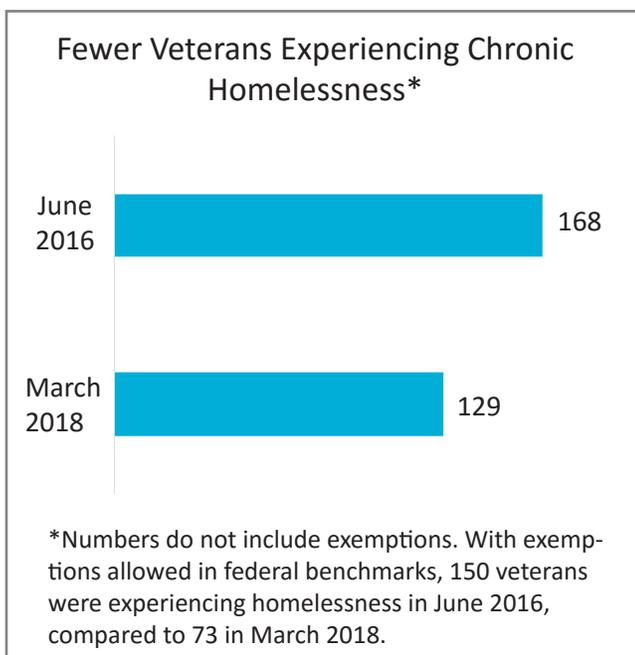
Graphic 2



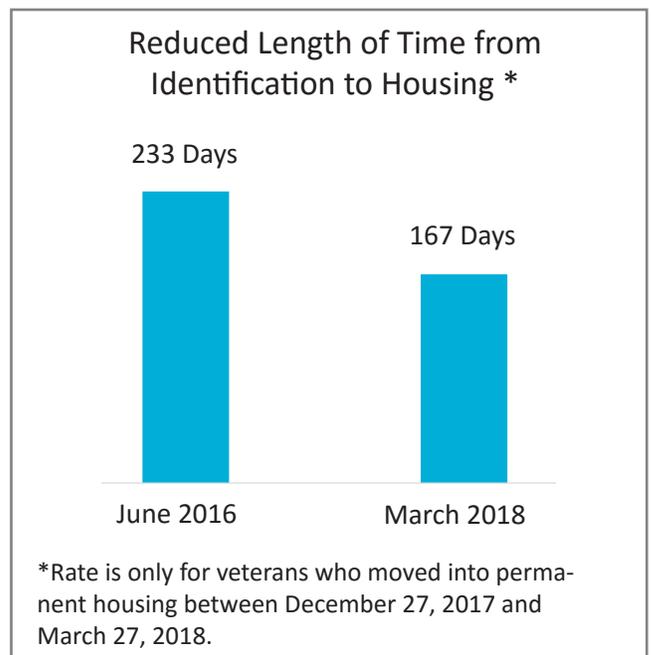
Graphic 3



Graphic 4



Graphic 5



ESSENTIAL DRIVERS

Nearly all interviewees cited three main factors driving EVHI's success: the political willpower exercised by the City of Chicago's mayor and the federal government; the continued commitment of members in the Leadership Team and Community Team; and the centralized data system with information on nearly every veteran without housing. The subsequent progress of EVHI would likely not have been possible if any one of these factors was absent.

POLITICAL WILLPOWER ALIGNED KEY STAKEHOLDERS

The federal government and the City of Chicago provided demonstrable support for ending veteran homelessness. Some stakeholders were initially wary of participating in EVHI and sharing scarce resources, including sensitive data and stretched staff time. Multiple interviewees noted that the interventions and actions of the federal and City government were essential in bringing – and retaining – key local stakeholders to the table, and empowering the local power-brokers to align funding needed for the initiative.

Mayor Rahm Emanuel demonstrated his commitment to ending veteran homelessness by allocating \$800,000 of the City's budget to efforts and lending support to EVHI's strategies, such as a letter-writing campaign to landlords. Chicago's DFSS Commissioner Lisa Morrison Butler is also a member of the Leadership Team, and the Mayor's Office meets regularly with the Leadership Team. Multiple interviewees noted that the City's continued engagement creates an additional sense of accountability and urgency to continually make progress.

Multiple federal entities led national initiatives that Chicago participated in. USICH brought together partners at the national, regional, and local level for peer learning, problem solving, and support (e.g., boot camps in partnership with Jesse Brown VA Medical Center). HUD and other federal, regional, and local agencies implemented critical technical assistance. Leadership from the federal and regional branches made certain that their support for the initiative was known to the local partners, and provided mediation when necessary to ameliorate any concerns or broker partnerships. Federal agencies also created benchmarks and criteria to gauge whether communities have successfully ended homelessness among veterans; these benchmarks helped unite stakeholders around a specific set of targets to strive toward.

Federal Benchmarks

USICH, HUD, and the VA created four benchmarks to determine whether cities have ended veteran homelessness: ending chronic and long-term homelessness; reducing the average length of time without housing to 90 days; providing sufficient permanent housing in the system; and committing to Housing First, with limited use of service-intensive transitional housing. The benchmarks provided a common vision for stakeholders locally and nationally, so every partner is united in the goals they're trying to achieve.

MEMBERS OF LEADERSHIP AND COMMUNITY TEAMS REMAINED COMMITTED

Membership in the Leadership Team has largely remained constant since the advent of EVHI, and these same members continue to be actively engaged. Multiple interviewees noted that the consistency of the Leadership Team provides symbolic and direct motivation to implementers and on-the-ground staff to continue working on the initiative. The presence of heads of major agencies at meetings, for example, signaled that these obligations are indeed worthwhile, thereby encouraging other staff to continue attending meetings.

When you have big players at the table, questions can get answered. And when the people in the room can make decisions, it helps you get things done faster."

— Tracy Emmanuel, LCSW, EVHI Leadership Team and System Integration Team

The structure of the Leadership Team – powerbrokers and resource managers – was also necessary for EVHI’s success. Program coordinators had more direct access to people who could immediately allocate resources and address challenges. For example, one major barrier to housing veterans is lack of documentation to prove that people are, in fact, veterans who are eligible for programs. Program coordinators identified and voiced this challenge to leaders of the VA, who then assigned VA staff with access to service records to meet with SSVF program coordinators to help determine eligibility.

“We also need people who are more involved in the day-to-day work and understand direct service and how the larger proposals would work or not work in each individual program.” — Suzanne Lemaire Lozier, EVHI Community Team and System Integration Team; Housing Resource Specialist – Lead Worker, SSVF, Heartland Human Care Services, Inc.

Similarly, EVHI would not have been possible without the dedicated members of the Community Team. EVHI required much more time and commitment than anyone had originally anticipated: additional meetings, new requirements for data entry, rapid changes in process and protocol, and pressure to meet targets. With no mandate or contractual obligation, internal staff at organizations sometimes balked at the extra work required on top of their normal job functions. Community Team leaders were continuously required to encourage their workers by validating and giving voice to frustration, understanding and reframing challenges, and problem solving. Some dedicated program managers even took on the extra work themselves to shield overburdened staff. Furthermore, Community Team leaders provided critical insights and feedback to the Leadership Team whenever policies or strategies were proposed. Together, the two teams provided the macro and micro-level expertise and power to change the system.

CENTRALIZED DATA SYSTEM WITH INFORMATION ON EVERY VETERAN

Data informed EVHI of the scope of the challenge, the progress being made, and the gaps and bottlenecks in the system. Matching every veteran to housing and ensuring he/she stays housed required a centralized data system with information from every organization working with veterans. A data dashboard was presented to the Leadership Team and Community Team at each meeting, so members could see the inflow and outflow of clients. All Chicago serves as the HMIS lead in Chicago, warehousing the client-level data from all HUD funded programs, providing regular reports to HUD, and ensuring data quality standards are met. The agency worked to overcome data challenges so that EVHI had system-level metrics to measure performance; these challenges are discussed in the next chapter.

Data-led Strategizing: Reducing Length of Time to Housing

One federal benchmark for ending veteran homelessness is to connect veterans to permanent housing within 90 days of identifying the veteran. With information on nearly every veteran available in HMIS, EVHI Leadership Team members observed that the average length of time it took to connect veterans to permanent housing in Chicago was 280 days. EVHI members dug into the data, tracking the process from matching the veteran to enrollment in the project, and then from enrollment into actual move-in date. Findings indicated that many veterans who were matched to SSVF programs were “lagging;” that is, they often missed assessment appointments with case managers and could not be located after having been matched to a project. Through discussions with service providers and leadership, EVHI lowered the length of time to 91 days by reducing the inspection period, creating more units, and creating system navigators to assist veterans through the housing process.

RESOURCES AND STRATEGIES

In combination with Mayoral and federal support and power, along with the commitment of the Leadership and Community Teams, EVHI was able to access a wide array of resources and develop a number of innovative strategies. Several are listed below.

ADDITIONAL HOUSING UNITS

EVHI provided the forum for members to make the case for more affordable housing units.

- CHA provided **450 Housing Choice Vouchers** for EVHI; these vouchers will be available until all have been utilized. Veterans in SSVF projects can sometimes have difficulty gaining or maintaining employment due to medical issues or other barriers. By the time the SSVF subsidy expires, these veterans lack the income to pay rent. SSVF providers, through the Community Team, identified this as a major issue and advocated for housing vouchers. This was also helpful for veterans who did not qualify for HUD VASH. In addition, CHA administers 1,100 HUD VASH vouchers for veterans referred by the VA.
- The VA provided **150 VASH vouchers, 40 project-based VASH units**, and SSVF funding. The national VA office wrote federal legislation providing guidance on how local VAs can participate in coordinated entry. The VA also prioritized taking at least 90% of their VASH referrals from the coordinated entry system.
- DFSS and the City of Chicago increased funding for **Emergency Solutions Grant Rapid Re-Housing (ESG RRH)** to develop projects dedicated to veterans. The ESG RRH expansion projects addressed a system gap by supporting veterans who did not meet general ESG RRH income requirements or did not qualify for SSVF due to their discharge status or income level. All Chicago is the system coordinator for ESG RRH projects, including the expansion projects for veterans.
- Mayor Rahm Emanuel wrote a letter to every landlord in the City informing them of the need for more units. The **letter from the Mayor** contained a link where landlords can input information about units. The CHA also appealed to **15,000 landlords** that they work with through the voucher program. Chicago gained several hundred units because of these outreach efforts. The initial \$800,000 investment from the City in 2014 contributed to 52 housing units. These units filled in a gap by targeting veterans who did not meet the VA housing eligibility criteria.

“A veteran in his 90s with medical needs was not going to increase income to sustain market rate housing. The CHA Housing Choice Vouchers were a lifesaver.”
— Renee Crolius, formerly EVHI Leadership Team, former Program Manager, SSVF, Heartland Human Care Services, Inc.

PREVENTION

Data revealed that a large number of new veterans were entering the homeless system.

- The Mayor’s Office and DFSS worked with the Elk’s Foundation to secure \$100,000 for the **Veteran Emergency Fund** to curb the number of veterans coming into the homeless system.

PROCESS INNOVATIONS

EVHI members also improved efficiency in moving veterans to permanent housing.

- **System navigation** is a process where dedicated staff members walk the most vulnerable veterans through the housing process from the time they are identified as homeless to their move-in date. Piloted in other cities, EVHI decided to test system navigation after realizing that some veterans remained in the system even after being assessed. DFSS carved out resources through RRH funds for a small pilot of navigators managed by CSH. Results have been very positive, and since then, CSH has been able to secure additional funding from HUD for more navigators. Now, agencies across the system can apply for system navigation support through the City.
- CHA expedited the **inspection process** so veterans can access available units more quickly. SSVF providers are now trained to conduct pre-inspections, which was identified as a backlog in the process.
- In addition, the process for **accessing vouchers** is now easier. Previously, veterans had to go through the CHA. Now, SSVF providers can facilitate the voucher attainment.
- **Standardized assessments** used by every EVHI participating agency were created and rapidly launched. Modifications are continuously made based on feedback.
- Community Team and Leadership Team members participated in **process mapping** to identify gaps in the system.

CAMPAIGNS AND EVENTS

EVHI members also organized standalone campaigns and events.

- In fall 2015, EVHI members identified 300 veterans who were enrolled with a SSVF provider, but had not yet been housed. The **300 Veterans in 30 Days** campaign focused on housing this subset of veterans. Executive Directors of SSVF programs were given data dashboards with referrals, assessments, inflows, and outflows. Members of the Leadership Team were assigned to each SSVF agency to review data and improve outcomes. System coordinators worked with a regional coordinator to tackle double-enrollment in VASH and SSVF. Between October 1, 2015 and November 12, 2015, the projects updated data on 99 veterans to reflect their permanent housing status, and housed 60 veterans into a permanent housing unit, leading to a decrease of 159 veterans experiencing homelessness out of the original 300 identified as experiencing homelessness.
- **Home for the Holidays** was developed to build motivation by rallying partners around a single event with an ambitious goal: house 100 veterans in one day. The project, which was associated with the 300 Veterans in 30 Days campaign, took place in fall 2015, and ultimately led to 63 veterans moving into permanent housing.⁵ EVHI members reached out to landlords to participate and make units available, and SSVF providers inspected units before the event. On the day of the event, veterans met with landlords, saw pictures of available units, chose a unit to live in, and even had a chance to sign the lease. Furniture was also donated or provided with heavy discounts.

⁵ Of the 63 veterans, 17 returned to the homeless system via entry into an emergency shelter, transitional housing, street outreach, or another RRH project, while 46 veterans remained housed.

LESSONS LEARNED, CHALLENGES OVERCOME

While EVHI has been largely successful, the success was not without struggle. Below are four examples of challenges EVHI members had to overcome and learn from.

BUILDING THE DATABASE AND BY-NAME LIST

The Rapid Results Institute had proposed to use a new data system outside of HMIS at the start of the initiative. All Chicago, the lead HMIS agency, had to advocate for using HMIS as the main database for EVHI. To make HMIS data complete and usable, All Chicago worked with vendors to build out and improve the database. Staff also significantly cleaned the data to remove duplicate entries and incorrect information.

At the time, HMIS was largely incomplete: the VA was not required to submit information and, in fact, used another database, Homeless Operations Management Systems (HOMES). The VA first had to overcome issues of privacy and data security before being allowed to put data into HMIS. Furthermore, leaders had to solve for the challenge of asking staff to work with two data systems, HOMES and HMIS. The national and regional VA offices provided much-needed guidance on sharing information and ensuring data quality, and also created tools like data encryption. The director of the VA medical center, as well as regional leaders, also helped create solutions so as not to overwhelm staff. In time, the VA entered into data-sharing agreements with All Chicago so that the HMIS database could be de-duplicated and EVHI members could work from the By-Name List with information on every homeless veteran in Chicago.

Cleaning the Assessment Data

Initially, HUD VASH projects did not accept referrals through EVHI. System-level data would then erroneously indicate that clients who were matched to but never enrolled in SSVF projects were still homeless, when in fact they may have entered a HUD VASH project instead. Regional VA and HUD offices worked with local teams to create a coordinated referral process between SSVF and VASH projects.

The process of matching veterans also faced data-related challenges. EVHI's new coordinated entry process replaced the Central Referral System (CRS). The matching process using the By-Name List was also flawed early on given the incomplete participation in HMIS and the major data cleaning that was necessary. Enrollment from referrals was low, at 40 percent, with agencies sometimes getting referrals for non-veterans or veterans who didn't meet program requirements. Members of the Leadership and Community Teams had to continually provide encouragement and problem solve. All Chicago increased trainings on data and HMIS usage.

CREATING A BALANCED STRUCTURE

The membership of the EVHI teams has evolved over time. At the start of EVHI, the Leadership Team was made up only of management from funding organizations. This decision was made in part to avoid any misconception of bias from selecting just one service provider. Nevertheless, multiple interviewees reflected on the initial disconnect felt between the Leadership Team and service providers because of that structure.

After many discussions and proposed policy changes, the Leadership Team and Community Team determined that changes were necessary. A member of the Community Team is now a formal member of the Leadership Team. One person representing all the SSVF projects also sits on the Leadership Team. Given the changing composition of

veterans who remain homeless in the system – many are now enrolled in GPD programs – a representative for the GPD projects also sits on the Leadership Team. The new structure has increased transparency in the processes and decisions coming from EVHI. Moreover, the feedback loop has become more efficient as service providers can more directly shape the strategies and provide insights into the intricacies of their projects.

Before changes to the structure could occur, the service providers first had to come together as a unified force. SSVF providers had continually been vocal about challenges and resources, but they mainly operated in agency silos. With support from regional leaders, the SSVF representatives organized themselves to identify a solution (i.e., membership in the Leadership Team) and continued to meet to discuss common challenges and advocate for mutually beneficial solutions (e.g., increased housing vouchers).

SSVF Self-Matching

Prior to EVHI, veterans could walk into a project and be enrolled in that project the same day. With the new coordinated entry system, veterans' needs had to be assessed, which could take 24-48 hours. EVHI did not initially permit self-matching, where providers may enroll the veteran into their own project. SSVF coordinators identified this as a major flaw and came together to advocate for the ability to self-match. The coordinators argued that being able to enroll the veterans immediately increased the odds that veterans become housed; in their experience, waiting even one or two days risked losing the veteran in the system. The Leadership Team made changes to enable self-matching.

ADAPTING TO RAPID CHANGE

The Rapid Results Institute organized the *25 Cities* initiative around time-limited goals, where leaders identified challenges and sought to achieve targets in short, defined time periods. Without a mandate in place requiring permission, the initiative was empowered to make decisions independently and continue onward with this feature of rapid change, experimentation, and innovation. Teams are encouraged to continuously test, learn, and refine, and look to data to see if their innovations have worked.

Members of EVHI had to learn, adopt, and accept the spirit of flexibility and experimentation. This meant project coordinators in the Community Team had to continuously provide feedback to proposed policy changes or strategies and relay new strategy directions to their direct line staff working with veterans. Leadership Team members had to closely monitor progress, using evidence to justify changes, and accept that the need to change direction and course correct was not failure.

Many interviewees have noted that, while incredibly stressful, this environment of trial and error yielded many useful innovations and policies (see “Resources and Strategies” in the previous section). Some interviewees opined that as the needs of veterans change, or become clearer, EVHI must continue to change their policies and strategies. For example, additional supportive services, prevention services, or strategies targeting senior veterans may be needed in the current environment.

Some interviewees also expressed concerns that the environment of aggressive goal-setting could risk turnover, burnout, or fatigue as the initiative continues. Establishing unrealistic goals, or not providing sufficient support to meet targets, can also be discouraging. Staff recommended processes to regularly recognize the successes and extra contributions made by staff to boost and maintain morale.

BUILDING TRUST, CREATING PARTNERSHIPS

Under EVHI, collaboration and cooperation were required, although neither occurred naturally or easily. Building trust was a necessary component of EVHI, and leaders of both the Leadership and the Community Teams had to invest time and energy into communicating with each other and their staff to talk through problems, build understanding, and increase transparency.

Many stakeholders involved in EVHI were accustomed to working independently, and the system had not before provided a forum for sharing of resources or regularly exchanging ideas. Leaders learned that additional work, and in fact, sacrifices, were necessary at the project level (e.g., reduction in intake numbers early in the initiative, since not every veteran who enters the project would be matched to the project). The transition period led to a slow-down of the workflow as processes changed and data was cleaned. Organizations had to adjust to these changes, which also meant trusting not only the leaders, but also the partners in EVHI.

Ultimately, the continued engagement of EVHI members prevailed in creating trust between stakeholders. Multiple interviewees hypothesized that less frequent meetings (e.g., monthly, as opposed to weekly) would have made this relationship building more difficult. Other interviewees reflected that meetings can sometimes provide much-needed emotional and mental support through shared experience.

NEXT STEPS

EVHI has evolved tremendously since it started in 2015, and so too has the environment it is operating in. Coordinated entry is now a HUD mandate that Continuums of Care must have in place by 2018. EVHI has served in many ways as a pilot for coordinated entry, with a shared data platform, a By-Name List, and an outreach team. Now, EVHI must evolve once more to exist in a system where every person and family experiencing homelessness will be housed in the same process. In addition, HMIS is a higher performing database than it was in 2015, with more agencies sharing data and understanding the importance of data-driven decision making. Data dashboards are also publicly available to the community, including specific population groups.⁶

As of March 2018, approximately 648 veterans are experiencing homelessness in the City of Chicago. Multiple interviewees expressed concern that the veterans who remain on the By-Name List are the ones who have the most severe barriers to housing and will require a higher level of care. Interviewees listed additional challenges, needs, and ideas for EVHI consideration:

- Resource needs:
 - Additional units, including supportive housing and more units in safer neighborhoods
 - Case management after housing placement to curb returns to homelessness and provide longer-term support
 - Increased prevention and diversion resources
 - Dedicated outreach workers who have a scheduled, routine presence in hot spots and the city (currently, staff with other job functions also perform outreach)
- Structural and process improvements:
 - Improved relationships with the shelter system
 - More connections to employment
 - Increase use of system navigators across all populations
 - Better targeting of veterans who do not fit certain requirements
 - Improved coordination between outreach and engagement efforts
 - Need to address fatigue so that the initiative remains relevant
 - Representation by a person with the lived experience of homelessness in the Leadership Team and/or Community Team
- Related factors:
 - Create more buy-in among the veteran community to the initiative (i.e., better emphasize the benefits of being housed to quality of life to clients who refuse housing)
 - Exploration of private-public partnerships for joint projects and additional resources
 - Better linkages to affordable housing development and preservation
 - Continued maintenance of partnerships

“EVHI is coming upon their biggest challenge...The further you go down the One List, the harder it is.”
— Isiah Norris, EVHI Community Team, Facility Director, FeatherFist FORT 2 – Transitional Housing Program

Interviewees have noted that some of the driving forces of EVHI – the political willpower and the concentration of resources that are available – is uncommon. Report participants also stated that each initiative has unique needs reflective of their capacity, demographics, and other factors. Nevertheless, the lessons learned from EVHI likely hold true for many other efforts adopted in the City of Chicago and elsewhere: the value of comprehensive, accurate data to support evidence-based decision-making; the need for a balanced governance structure to achieve coordination and cooperation; the challenges and benefits of experimentation and innovation; and the patience required to build trust and meaningful partnerships.

⁶ All Chicago Making Homelessness History, 2018, “Chicago’s Dashboard to End Homelessness.” <https://allchicago.org/dashboard-to-end-homelessness>

APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW DISCUSSION GUIDE

1. Please tell me the background of EVHI, as you know it.
2. What is the organizational structure of EVHI?
3. How did your organization get involved?
4. How were other members/partners of EVHI brought on board? What compelled them to join or participate?
5. What was/is your specific role in EVHI?
6. How do organizations and leaders outside of the Leadership Team engage with EVHI leadership or the initiative?
7. When EVHI began, what were the greatest challenges to ending veteran homelessness?
 - a. How were these challenges addressed?
 - b. What challenges remain?
8. *(If not discussed)* What resources (staff support, information, funding, etc.) were needed but not available, or not sufficiently available?
 - a. What resources are still insufficient?
9. What were the greatest strengths of the initiative? What components/strategies were critical to the success and functioning of the initiative?
10. What is left to do? How do we ensure that EVHI achieves its goal of ending veteran homelessness?
11. If another initiative was formed, what are some lessons you would apply?



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