Best Practice “Spotlight”

Homeless Veterans Reintegration Program (HVRP)
Incarcerated Veterans Transition Program (IVTP)
Homeless Female Veterans Program (HFVP)

A supplement to the 2011 National Coalition for Homeless Veterans (NCHV) Best Practice Guide
Best Practice “Spotlight”
National Veterans Technical Assistance Center at Syracuse University

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Introduction

This Best Practices “Spotlight” Guide (hereinafter referred to as “Spotlight”) is a supplement to the National Coalition for Homeless Veterans (NCHV) 2011-2012 Best Practices Guide. It has been created and designed to assist Homeless Veterans Reintegration Programs (HVRPs), Incarcerated Veterans Transition Programs (IVTPs) and Homeless Female Veterans Programs (HFVPs) to better understand the networking and complex system building necessary for successful program and employment outcomes, as measured by the U.S. Department of Labor, Veterans Employment and Training Service (DOL-VETS). Each program highlighted in this Spotlight has leveraged partnerships and/or used innovative and creative practices that have helped to achieve significant success in helping more veterans experiencing homelessness and other significant barriers to employment obtain, retain and advance in their jobs and careers.

This Spotlight takes an in-depth view at four selected programs and discusses not only what each is doing that enables them to achieve high job placement and retention rates, but also identifies the main requirements for success and conditions necessary for replication. The programs featured were selected for inclusion in this Spotlight by DOL-VETS and the Burton Blatt Institute (operator of the National Veterans Technical Assistance Center/NVTAC), with input and assistance by NCHV.

More about the National Veterans Technical Assistance Center/NVTAC can be found at: http://bbi.syr.edu/nvtac/about/index.htm.

The information used to create this Spotlight was obtained via multiple telephone interviews with program leaders and summarized by NVTAC staff and consultants.

Background

DOL-VETS awards annual grants to communities for the purpose of providing job training (including job readiness and literacy skills), counseling, and placement services to facilitate the reintegration of homeless veterans into the labor force. HVRP grantees are intended to serve veterans of all eras and conflicts. Program grantees are located in both rural and urban settings and may target specific populations of homeless veterans, including female veterans, veterans with families, and/or veterans who have been incarcerated. Eligible grant applicants include State and Local Workforce Investment Boards, local public agencies, for-profit/commercial entities, and non-profit organizations, including faith-based and/or community-based organizations. Applicants must demonstrate a familiarity with the geographic area and population to be served, and must establish the ability to administer an effective and timely program.
Spotlighting Best Practices in HVRP/IVTP/HFVPs

Spotlighting exemplary practices helps to stimulate thinking, discussion, and practical problem solving for similar grantees/programs. In these challenging times of budget cuts and economic downturn, learning from and replicating practices that have led to demonstrable positive employment outcomes for veterans who have experienced homelessness is a worthy, cost effective effort.

This Spotlight has been written as a tool that both new and experienced programs can reference as a checklist and/or use to support developing strategies that will assist in achieving and maintaining successful employment outcomes. It includes four programs funded through the DOL-VETS HVRP grant process. All DOL-VETS grantees report their outcomes quarterly into a national database, and as directed by DOL-VETS, the national database was the primary source of information used for selecting grantees for this Spotlight.

At the start of each program year, grantees identify specific targeted outcome goals and performance is measured by examining the relationship between goals stated and goals achieved each quarter. The four program performance goals that were used as a basis for Spotlight selection included: a) program assessments conducted; b) job placements made; c) average cost per placement; and d) overall job retention.

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<th>Domain</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<th>Low Performing</th>
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<td>Assessments Conducted</td>
<td>Assessment (intake) is a process including: screening individual applicants for program eligibility and making the level of need determinations; making an initial determination of what services or programs can best benefit the applicants; providing information about services, program eligibility, and the availability of those services, and the routing or selecting individual applicants for particular service delivery or program participation.</td>
<td>&lt;106%</td>
<td>&gt;=105%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Placement Rate</td>
<td>Placement rate is a method used to determine the percentage of participants who become employed. The figure is calculated by dividing the number of total participants who were enrolled into the program by the number of applicants or program participants who were placed or otherwise entered employment.</td>
<td>&lt;101%</td>
<td>&gt;=100%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cost per Placement</td>
<td>The cost per placement into unsubsidized employment is obtained by dividing the total funds expended by the total of direct placements plus assisted placements.</td>
<td>&lt;82%</td>
<td>&gt;=81%</td>
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<td>Retention Rate</td>
<td>Job Retention is a <em>Common Measure</em> based on the number of program participants who entered employment (or those exiting the program who earned wages in the quarter after their placement) divided by those existing the program who also earned wages in all three quarters after their placement. Grantees do not report retention rates in the first, second, or third quarters following a job placement because it requires three quarters after placement to determine employment retention.</td>
<td>&lt;55%</td>
<td>&gt;=54%</td>
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Determining Which Best Practices to Spotlight

For HVRP grantees to achieve a high rate of employment outcomes it clearly takes visionary management, dedicated staff and creative leveraging of resources. Each of the programs featured in this Spotlight has demonstrated a range of promising practices worthy of highlighting. The Spotlight has been organized into the following broad categories determined to be shared in common across all four programs and directly relevant to their exemplary performance outcomes:

1. Overall Keys to Success offers a description of the agency and a context for each program’s overall mission and what each has determined as their keys to success.

2. Auxiliary Service Strategies for Targeted Populations identifies unique/effective strategies that have been developed and implemented to engage targeted veteran populations, such as gender specific (female) veterans, veterans with criminal backgrounds and/or veterans with disabilities.

3. Staffing includes recruiting and training staff, peer support/mentors, team building/communication; highlights unique/effective strategies to recruit qualified staff and/or improve the skills of current HVRP staff; hiring formerly homeless veterans as members of HVRP staff; and consistent and proactive communications with and among staff, partners and program participants.

4. Continuum of Care Network Connections highlights a commitment to active participation and leadership in the Continuum of Care Network of Homeless Assistance Programs, a strategy that helps programs to better coordinate housing and service funding for homeless families and individuals.

5. Partnership Development highlights unique/effective strategies used for developing long-lasting and mutually beneficial partnerships that focus on employment and case management barrier removal for the HVRP population—without the duplication of services—and may focus on providing a wraparound service structure to better serve veteran participants seeking jobs and help them obtain and sustain employment. Such partnerships can include working with employers and DOL One Stops, educational institutions and others.

6. A Focus on Continuous Program and Quality Improvement highlights staff communication/structure of sharing information, how outcomes are measured and tracked, creative ways of utilizing funding/partnerships, creative uses of technology and how staff are hired and trained to perform their responsibilities to program quality expectations.

7. Proactive Outreach focuses on the unique/effective strategies used to engage participants, employers and the community, and may include the use of technology as a way to keep the constituency base informed in “real time.”
8. **Veteran/Participant Engagement** includes the unique and effective methods used for engaging participants in a self-sufficiency or empowerment model that helps them choose, obtain and sustain employment.

9. **Employer Engagement** goes deeper than partnership tools used in working with employers and highlights the effective use of employer outreach strategies/engagement tools, marketing techniques, customer service post-placement and other methods for obtaining and filling job positions by HVRPs.

10. **Employment Outcome Expectations** highlights each program’s view of how to keep program/employment expectations realistic and focused.
Best Practices Spotlights

In alphabetical order

Asheville Buncombe Community Christian Ministry
Minnesota Assistance Council for veterans
Ohio Valley Goodwill Industries
Operation Stand Down Nashville, Inc.
Overall Keys to Success

The Asheville Buncombe Community Christian Ministry (ABCCM) believes the most important key to the organization’s success is the network of partnerships it has established. Also significant is the complete evaluation conducted of every client to determine strengths, needs, and goals. Rather than concentrating on entry-level jobs, ABCCM focuses on career-level tracks in the most active local industries such as healthcare, hospitality, retail and biofuels. This also includes jobs in the Green Collar sector (weatherization, solar, building analysts, etc.), transportation and information technology sectors.

Communication and long standing relationships with other agencies can also be counted as a key to success for ABCCM. Maintaining ongoing, face-to-face contact with partners is critical; and building this trust often takes time. The organization takes the time to visit similar programs and listen to their principles and lessons learned.

ABCCM believes the five top reasons for the organization’s successful employment outcomes are: (1) the belief that the organization cannot succeed in isolation; (2) the ability to look outside the organization to identify and partner with people who are already providing key services to the community; (3) networking with both resources/service providers and employers; (4) looking for mentors from within their own program (including veteran clients); and (5) conducting proactive follow-up.

Auxiliary Service Strategies for Targeted Populations

*Female veterans:* ABCCM’s counselors work hard to address the personal issues of female veterans, including any history of abuse and childcare issues or needs. Network resources are often called in as necessary. A close relationship with the Department of Social Services (DSS), housing resources and the VA are secured to ensure whatever services are needed are received. With regard to case management for female veterans, the greatest distinction is that case managers are all female. Trusted relationships with female outreach coordinators at the VA helped to improve recruitment for this population. Additionally, a background in trauma-informed care (including sexual trauma) and case management is extremely important. The organization has found the Department of Labor’s Women’s Bureau’s [Trauma-Informed Care for Women veterans Experiencing Homeless](https://www.dol.gov/esa/workforce-development/trauma-informed-care) to be very beneficial for staff.

*Veterans with Criminal Justice backgrounds:* The organization takes advantage of a “Fresh Start Job Fair,” which is exclusively for people with criminal records, though not necessarily veterans. ABCCM partners with Goodwill Industries and the Salvation Army to coordinate this effort – and focuses on employer education and awareness in addition to potential employment outcomes. ABCCM conducts workshops for the veterans that are applying for jobs on how to deal with issues surrounding criminal backgrounds. At the doors to the event, every client is prescreened to be sure he or she meets a minimal dress code, has an appropriate resume, and is offered advice on how to communicate strengths and weaknesses.

The employers that attend these events come because they are willing to hire (or at least give an opportunity to) people with criminal justice records. There is a great deal of outreach that is conducted before the event, which is primarily done through ABCCM’s robust network of contacts in the faith-based
community. Although faith-based organizations play some role in each of the Spotlight programs, ABCCM is unique in repeatedly highlighting communities of faith as key factors in its success. When asked why this was such a central focus for them, they replied that building a network is not just about knocking on doors and hoping to find someone who cares - it's about identifying a community of people who are guided by the same core belief that everyone deserves a second chance.

*Cultural diversity:* ABCCM hires culturally diverse staff, and can pull from a very diverse group of volunteers and mentors, including race and gender diversity. Connecting with a number of churches and other organizations helps the ABCCM to meet the goal of cultural diversity.

*Veterans with disabilities:* ABCCM works as a Social Security Administration Ticket to Work Employment Network and is able to assist veterans who are on disability insurance to get back into work. The organization also partners with other agencies, such as Goodwill Industries, that focus on skill development and training for people with disabilities. These additional partnerships have resulted in veterans gaining access to refurbished computers and job preparedness training.

*Rural veterans:* Though most of ABCCM’s clients are from urban areas, the organization performs outreach to smaller counties that have some sort of a ministry or employment office covering the region. Clearly there are fewer resources available in rural areas so "We go see them" where they are – and will try to coordinate their activities with a larger effort. ABCCM has identified and partnered with a homeless facility where staff can be on site and can see multiple veterans at one time to introduce them to the program. Whenever possible staff doubles up on visits with other agencies in order to offer a greater variety of services at one time. Job developers locate employment and training opportunities in the communities where they live, but may also assist someone using the Veterans Restoration Quarter housing unit to help them to relocate to the ‘city’ if they want to get a job there. Using the Per-Diem program, a two-year window is available to help a veteran get their lives back together. In many cases, people will be employed in the city for a year or so, and build up resources and experience to move back home.

**Staffing**

At least one-half of the staff at ABCCM is veterans. However, the organization is more focused on the staff’s level of professional skill than veteran status, because peer support services can always be delivered from veterans. Though staff is very spread out geographically, they meet on a weekly basis to discuss client progress, share case notes and troubleshoot individual problems.

Management is considered to be “participatory” rather than top-down meaning that staff is empowered to foster independent thinking so they can identify problem areas or areas where conditions are good for improving services. The organization’s executive director knows every veteran client by name and will pitch in to provide case management services whenever necessary. HVRP specialists have a firm grasp of what is required within the grant, but they also recognize that every individual situation is unique. Specialists are doing follow-up on a regular basis - there is a very slim period of time when they are not in the field, meeting with employers or clients. This staffing structure is particularly well suited to rural outreach because distance service demands field workers who are self-sufficient, and able to make impactful decisions without having to clear everything through the hierarchy by telephone.
HVRP specialists are given the flexibility to work with a client and find the best solutions to address their problems. In one example, a veteran was adamant that he wanted flexibility in “coming and going” and did not want to talk to people. The HVRP specialist helped this veteran explore a career as a truck driver, which not only fit his environmental conditions for employment, but also turned into successful and lasting employment.

**Mentoring** - ABCCM uses a strong mentoring support system, and recruits mentors from the veterans that are participating in the program or those who have successfully completed it. Veterans will generally respond well to the wisdom of others who come across as having strong leadership qualities. Formally, a program called “Circles” has been created where volunteers from middle-income households serve as mentors for veterans. Mentoring opens up the veteran's social network to people outside the homeless and unemployed community.

Mentors commit to four hours a month for 18 months to spend time alongside the veteran. Both mentors and clients receive training: clients, on how to relate with people who come from middle income backgrounds; and mentors, on how to deal with someone who has been facing poverty, how their standards and values may be different, and how to assist without being an enabler or taking too much control.

**Continuum of Care Network Connections**

ABCCM has been participating in a Continuum of Care (COC) since its infancy (about 15 years) – and provided key leadership in the local network establishment. In North Carolina, the COC started as a homeless coalition and has since evolved into a strong network with a plan specifically targeted at homelessness. Participating in a COC is something they take for granted as an “obvious” connection, since the COC model lays out a plan for communities regarding how to embrace a structure that is effective, and incorporates multiple approaches from emergency care, transitional housing, education, rapid rehabilitation, and employment/placement strategies. Due to the efforts of the COC, ABCCM has seen a decrease in the numbers of those who are deemed “chronically homeless.” Through their work with the COC, ABCCM prevented 146 people (70 households) from becoming homeless in 2011.

While ABCCM is a large organization, it is also part of a successful COC, with strong business relationships and strong veteran service organization participation/relationships. They are strong believers in the "It takes a village" service philosophy.

**Partnership Development**

ABCCM’s vision on partnership development is simple: if you see a need for a client, start looking for someone who can address that need. They have a diverse assortment of partners including, but not limited to Goodwill, the Department of Social Services and the Employment Security Commission (One Stop Career Center). Solid partnerships also exist with a number of homeless facilities – and these facilities know to contact ABCCM when veterans show up.

A partnership with the Asheville-Buncombe Technical College (ABTECH) allows veterans to gain access to skills training and educational resources. ABCCM approached ABTECH several years ago, and asked, "What can we do to get folks enrolled easier and quicker?" ABCCM was able to acquire an old motel as part of a restoration project, and worked with ABTECH to teach classes at that site. Some classes are
veteran only, like a culinary training class, which is helping to put veterans on career tracks and they can work toward becoming certified cooks, not just burger flippers at low wages. The organization offers job-readiness classes and attracts volunteers who can provide clothing, food, and mentorship. Other partnerships include those focused on a grant per-diem program, partnerships with VA center, and a transitional housing program blended with education through HVRP and the veteran's Workforce Investment Program.

A Focus on Continuous Program and Quality Improvement

In looking to the future, ABCCM would like to strengthen on-the-job training programs and hopes to develop more opportunities for people to get back into the workforce while helping them to determine their longer term job and career goals. ABCCM has established a trucking training program, and is enacting plans to take over a trucking school as a for-profit enterprise. Forklift training classes are sponsored – and graduates can enter a job-training program at the local donation center and thrift store. The donation centers need warehouse management staff, forklift operators, retail and customer service staff, as well as local truck drivers.

ABCCM also partners with Culinary Commandoes, a program that provides temporary employment in the catering business while participants can look for other types of work. Culinary Commandoes also offers culinary training (to be a chef) and/or hotel management programs to interested participants. Interestingly, the Culinary Commandoes program was actually founded by a group of graduates from ABCCM’s training programs.

For veterans who enter any of these aforementioned training programs, there is a 100% completion rate. About 90% go on to become employed after these training programs, and retention rates at the 18-month period average 87%.

Proactive Outreach

Staff maintains ongoing, face-to-face contact with partners, referral sources, etc. to keep the flow of referrals constant.

Being part of the American Legion helps to identifying employers that will hire a homeless veteran. ABCCM has the only nationally chartered American Legion center operated by veterans for veterans. The American Legion is a great networking resource, and its members tend to denote a sense of stability and also make excellent mentors, since some of the older veterans have experienced recovery. Making sure the veteran is integrated into some type of civic family is a great way to outreach to the community – whether it is the American Legion or anything else that keeps the veteran in touch with the community. Integration into a civic family gives the veteran someone to be accountable to, well after they have left the direct supervision of the HVRP.

Veteran/Participant Engagement

ABCCM developed an effective and on-target assessment form that gathers information on where veterans are living and what services they may already be connected to. Using that information as a base, staff helps to build a plan to address gaps and needs without service duplication. Staff and counselors make it clear from the very beginning that this is a support resource, not a placement service.
Reorienting a homeless veteran to a path of self-sufficiency remains a very difficult challenge. But helping veterans understand their benefits and how much better their lives would be if they lived off income from a good job, rather than benefits, really begins as part of the assessment process. The assessment determines whether or not the candidate is truly interested in changing their circumstances, or whether they see this as just one more free ride that they can get. Sometimes, enrolling a candidate in the program has to be postponed if the latter is suspected. Veterans need to find out where they would like to see themselves, and that way staff can help them to build their plans towards achieving that goal.

One of the first steps is helping a veteran to develop a strong resume. Once they have a paper that portrays them in a positive light, they start seeing themselves differently. Follow-up while they are in the job search process is very important, so staff and the veteran must commit early to a regular follow-up plan that will persist even after a job is secured. Follow-up may be a weekly meeting to discuss what the veteran has done to get his/her resume out, or discussing issues that may have come up in interviews (such as how to approach a criminal background and how to avoid sharing too much or too little information). HVRP specialists spend a lot of time motivating and encouraging, as this is a very vulnerable time. Meetings may also be a time where the specialist and the veteran work together to “pound the pavement” to find employers. Some veterans only need one or two meetings and they are set.

**Employer Engagement**

ABCCM is committed to strong communication and follow-up with employers, and focuses on an "under-promise and over-deliver" philosophy. The organization prepares candidates to meet an employer’s hiring needs by partnering to provide soft skills training, providing clients with clothing, and if necessary, work shoes and a uniform.

In addition, veterans who have graduated from the Culinary Commandoes training program prepare quarterly “thank you” dinners for many employer partners. This gives the veterans a chance to build confidence in their skills, and meet employers in a less intimidating setting than a formal interview. For the employers, these dinners reinforce the idea that homeless veterans are willing and able to do first-rate work when given the chance.

**Employment Outcome Expectations**

Follow-up is the key to successful employment outcomes, expectations and retention. Strong and consistent communication helps to identify and address problems before they happen. This means regular documented meetings with the employer. The frequency and nature of these meetings will depend on the individual veteran, but is mostly an understanding between ABCCM and the employer – and generally a simple phone call. For some veterans, a more frequent and steady check-in schedule is created. For some, onsite visits help to make the employer feel more secure. Each and every follow-up is determined by the needs presented in the particular placement. ABCCM encourages each veteran to make a commitment to stay connected with the organization after being hired, not just to his or her case manager, but to the entire community. Their participation as a peer mentor, a role model, or just someone to talk to, helps other veterans overcome their own obstacles as well.
Connections are so important after being disconnected by homelessness, so staff encourage and support veterans to become an active member of his or her organization. After all, being an active employee is not just about showing up on time or carpooling – it is about having strong co-worker relationships.

By implementing these practices, ABCCM has placed 327 veterans (men and women) back into the workforce from 422 enrolled in grant per diem. That is a 75% placement rate – and includes an 87% retention rate after 18 months, with jobs averaging $12 to $14 per hour. Veterans are not only graduating out of poverty – but into the middle class – and they are not coming back. Four out of five veterans are leaving the program for good.
Minnesota Assistance Council for Veterans

Overall Keys to Success

The primary mission of Minnesota Assistance Council for Veterans (MACV) is to provide assistance throughout Minnesota to motivated veterans and their families who are homeless or experiencing other life crises. MACV accomplishes its mission by providing services directly or in collaboration with other service agencies. One of the key areas MACV focuses on to further their mission is employment. However, the realization that services must be holistic and include a coordination of housing, legal-related issues and employment is of critical importance. MACV seeks and receives grants for each of these three priority areas, making it easier and more cost-efficient to provide wrap-around services to each veteran based on their needs.

Veterans with significant barriers to employment tend to have very complex issues – and MACV works hard to be able to provide the needed and linked array of services in housing, legal assistance, and employment. MACV maintains close relationships with organizations with which to refer for services not directly provided onsite, such as medical, psychiatric, and benefits counseling/management. MACV strives to be non-duplicative in the services the organization provides. Employment services for this population cannot be a stand-alone activity. Programs that provide life stabilization and support services along with employment services will achieve greater success.

MACV believes that employment is not sustainable without addressing the deeper issues and causes of homelessness. HVRP grant funding alone does not support the service structure needed by most homeless veterans. To provide a stronger foundation for this needed structure, MACV connects veterans who are homeless to transitional housing opportunities through its VA Grant & Per Diem as well as Structured Independent Living transitional and permanent supportive housing homes that MACV owns and operates. MACV also has grants to assist veterans with rental assistance for first month’s rent or for prevention when faced with imminent eviction. The organization’s legal program directly addresses many civil legal barriers to obtaining and maintaining housing and employment.

By providing veterans with direct non-duplicative services and developing relationships with community partners, MACV feels it is able to help veterans set themselves up for long-term employment success.

Auxiliary Services for Special Populations

Women veterans experiencing homelessness tend to present with additional barriers. Childcare issues must be factored into the individualized employment plan, and finding access to affordable childcare becomes a priority. Additionally, financial planning and time management strategies are incorporated into program planning to help female veterans succeed. Identifying and helping homeless female veterans find housing continues to be one of MACV’s greatest privileges. MACV participates in local homeless Continuum of Care committees to develop relationships with organizations providing housing to women and families with housing and childcare needs. MACV is able to provide short-term rental assistance to assist in obtaining housing and prevent homelessness for women veterans and their families.

Also, MACV is a Supportive Services for Veterans Family (SSVF) provider. This grant allows limited provisions for childcare that allows the veteran to go out and look for work without children-in-tow. SSVF’s also provide access to housing and supportive services, benefits advisement, and links to VA...
sponsored employment services, among others. Additional partnerships are developed with other organizations whose main focus is serving other populations, and for which there may be an overlap. For example, the East Metro Women’s Council is an organization whose main focus is to help women take care of their families. While not veteran specific, the resources can be used for female veterans.

_Veterans with criminal backgrounds_ need more support and assistance than basic record expungement, which in many instances may not be a realistic possibility. Relationships have been established with the available local veterans’ justice courts to help veterans entering and exiting the justice system. MACV’s Vetlaw program has developed relationships for pro bono legal services to assist veterans with family issues, debt collection, child support, etc. Regular legal clinics have been established to help veterans with legal barriers to housing and employment. While funding for these services is out of the purview of HVRP, MACV has been able to partner closely with law firms and legal services agencies to effectively provide, maintain, and coordinate these services as part of the veteran’s overall employment and stability plan. Prior to assisting with civil legal matters, many MACV HVRP participants would be successful in obtaining employment, but would become discouraged when wages were garnished to the point where housing was not affordable. Adding legal assistance to the employment program provides the opportunity to explore financial options and choices—and helps veterans who are fathers to “do the right thing” while still being able to survive. Legal services also assist many veterans with obtaining driver’s licenses, helping to eliminate one more enormous barrier to employment and self-sufficiency.

MACV partners with local law firms to train community attorneys to work on expungement cases (generally at no charge to the veteran). Training begins every June and many of the teaching materials have already been developed by local non-profit community agencies whose specialty is working with criminal backgrounds.

Additionally, MACV conducts in-reach into local jails, sends outreach staff to transition fairs, and participates in the Department of Correction’s transition committee. These actions lead to many cross-referrals and case sharing.

The key to successful placement of veterans with criminal backgrounds is the relationships developed with employers. Establishing trust will help employers to feel much more confident in working with veterans referred by MACV. The goal of the organization is long-term relationships with employers based on open communication to help veterans with criminal backgrounds to secure employment.

_Veterans with service-connected or other disabilities_ may need medical care in coordination with employment services. MACV maintains strong connections to the VA medical facilities and other county offices responsible for benefits to ensure entitlements are understood and accessed. Follow-up questions are included into employment planning meetings to ensure veterans are following through on benefits claims. MACV will refer interested veterans with service-connected disabilities to educational programs that will help them achieve their long-term vocational goals, while providing short-term stability. However, most often the key to successfully working with veterans with disabilities is having an understanding of what each veteran’s capabilities and goals are and developing relationships with a wide variety of employers from multiple industry sectors. MACV can then refer veterans to jobs for which they are qualified and capable.
Staffing

MACV places a priority on hiring veterans as agency staff whenever possible. Many veterans relate better to other veterans, which can often be the conduit to helping the veterans with program acceptance and commitment. MACV is successful because staff supports one another and clearly understands that treating HVRP participants with dignity, honesty and respect is essential to providing effective services. This is the foundation for strong and lasting program and participant relationships.

Team planning and communication among staff is crucial, and the MACV regional staff meets regularly (weekly) to discuss what is going on in the community that could impact and affect veterans who are homeless. Specific client issues are brought up at the weekly regional staff meetings for the whole staff to weigh in on and lend their expertise. Regional directors meet at other times and these meetings tend to be more formal and focus on broader goals. Annually, the entire staff is brought together for a mission overview/refocusing.

The effectiveness of staff meetings, especially for the purpose of information sharing, is not to be underestimated. Staff is very busy and it can be easy to lose the benefit of shared expertise and support. This process helps to make sure that every participant is gaining the benefit of all staff’s shared resources and expertise.

Partnership Development

MACV determines needed partners by considering the following questions: (1) Who are the current partners? (2) What services do these partners provide? (3) What additional services do MACV program participants need? (4) Who are the programs within the community that provides those services? (5) What is the mission of those programs? MACV works to understand the needs of current and future partners in order to develop a purposeful relationship – one of mutual and vested interest.

MACV partners with a variety of organizations and government agencies to better serve the needs of the homeless veteran population. Partnership development focuses on those organizations that provide services other than what MACV provides. These partnerships are at the local, state and federal levels and include government and community-based services.

Partners at the state and local levels – For the HVRP participant population, the most important relationships grantees can have is with both the State and Federal Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). It is critically important to know where the local (or closest) VA medical facility is; who is part of the VA’s homeless outreach team; and who the benefits advisors are. In addition, County Veterans Service Officers (VSOs), Tribal VSOs, and state and local Department of Veterans Affairs representatives need to be integral members of the team, since those at the local level are often able to provide an important link for veterans eligible for service-related benefits. Any veteran is able to connect with their federal VSO for medical, service-connected disability/pension, education benefits, and discharge upgrade/appeals. They also frequently provide optical and dental vouchers. When partnerships with area VSOs are strong, cross-referrals become commonplace.

Just as important are State Department of Labor representatives (Disabled Veterans Outreach Program specialists/DVOPs and Local Veterans Employment Representatives/LVERs) at the local workforce
center. These partners provide access to interview workshops, employer contacts and other resources, such as career interest and skills testing, services that MACV need not duplicate.

MACV partners with the Minnesota Department of Veterans Affairs to provide rental assistance to veterans who are homeless or at imminent risk of homelessness. This partnership helps to provide stable housing through the job seeking process.

Partnering with local homeless programs allows for increased program referrals. Most local programs include asking if individuals have served in the military as part of their intake. This has not always been the case, and MACV has long advocated for this question to be included so that veterans can be referred for their earned benefits.

Additionally, MACV works closely with the VFW (Veterans of Foreign Wars), the American Legion and VVA (Vietnam Veterans of America), Compensated Work Therapy Program at the VA Health Care System, the VA Homeless Outreach Program, Regional Office Vocational Counselors (Chapter 31 programs) and Vet Centers across the state.

**Federal partnerships** – With regard to federal partnerships, as a Department of Veterans Affairs (DVA) Supportive Services for Veterans Families (SSVF) grant recipient, MACV partners closely with the VA at the federal level to address veteran homelessness. The SSVF Program grants are awarded to private non-profit organizations and consumer cooperatives that will provide supportive services to very low-income veterans and their families residing in or transitioning to permanent housing. MACV is a HUD Supportive Housing Program (SHP) program provider that helps develop housing and related supportive services for people moving from homelessness to independent living. MACV provides 13 beds of transitional housing through the VA Grant & Per Diem (GPD) program. For many veterans coming from long-term homelessness, GPD provides the structure and support to help become ready to succeed in the workforce.

By incorporating other grants and programs and collaborating with other agencies focusing on ending homelessness, MACV is better prepared to help its clientele find and live in a stable place, which ultimately helps them to gain more control over the important decisions that affect their lives, and the lives of others.

**Connecting with the Continuum of Care Network**

MACV is a member of the Continuum of Care (COC) Network in Minnesota. The COC helps communities plan for and provide a full range of emergency, transitional and permanent housing and other service resources to address the various needs of homeless persons. The COC’s approach is based on the understanding that homelessness is not caused merely due to lack of “shelter”- rather it involves a variety of underlying, unmet needs including physical, economic and social. COC’s are designed to encourage localities to develop a coordinated and comprehensive long-term approach to homelessness. The Network consolidates the planning, application and reporting documents for the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development’s Shelter Plus Care, Section 8 Moderate Rehabilitation Single-Room Occupancy Dwellings (SRO) Program and the Supportive Housing Program. Some of the Minnesota COC Network members and collaborating groups include the Salvation Army, Catholic Charities, Legal Services, Goodwill Industries, County Homeless Response Teams, Housing Redevelopment Authority,
housing providers, Workforce Centers, Minnesota Department of Human Services and Community Action Agencies. Being a Network member of the COC allows MACV to access a breadth of services that might otherwise be difficult, at best.

MACV got involved in the COC simply by starting to show up at meetings several years ago. The COC network caught the attention of MACV because of the great partnerships that existed between other community service agencies. The organization wanted to strengthen connections with other service providers that were not veteran specific but had programs from which veterans could benefit, and those that had veteran clients that they didn't know how to fully serve. Now MACV serves on most of the committees of COC, both locally and at the statewide level. MACV found network participants to be very receptive to a new voice at the table, especially one experienced with the veterans’ population. MACV is not just an HVRP grantee, but provides housing and legal services as well. MACV has become a strong and respected member of the COC network.

A Focus on Continuous Program and Quality Improvement

In order to provide a continuum of wraparound services to the homeless veteran population, MACV is always on the lookout for additional funding sources – and additional partners. This includes keeping keenly aware of and connected to the agencies that provide grants (at the local, state and federal levels) and the local areas and programs that are receiving grants for service delivery. MACV provides services statewide, which also helps to attract funding sources from a wider area. Statewide service delivery helps MACV to provide services to those veterans who might be moving around the state – especially for the purpose of finding and maintaining employment.

MACV uses technology to focus on continuous quality improvement when communicating with staff, veterans and the community. The MACV website hosts basic program information, program eligibility, resource links, upcoming events and more. The organization also produces a quarterly newsletter and a downloadable annual report to keep its partners and funders informed. Lastly, MACV uses Facebook as a social media tool for the purpose of informing the community of events, etc., in real time. The MACV Facebook uses a “question of the month” (similar to a frequently asked question (FAQ) format) to relay information such as: What items can I donate to help MACV assist our veterans in need? How does MACV help veterans find resources to remove legal barriers to employment or housing? What are the eligibility requirements for MACV programming? MACV also uses technology in conjunction with the Vetlaw program, such as Skype and other interface technologies that allow for veteran/volunteer attorney consultations for veterans who live in rural areas and do not have local attorneys specializing in their areas of need.

Proactive Outreach

MACV staff visits shelters and conducts street outreach on a regular basis. By maintaining a consistent presence in the local shelters, potential veteran participants feel more confident what the program is offering is real and that there will be follow-through. Proactive outreach also gives staff the chance to observe what supports might need to be made early in the engagement/assessment process, and what additional partnerships MACV may need to engage.
Proactive outreach also means preparing referral sources and partners with a clear understanding of MACV services. Successful outreach involves being in the community, meeting partners, and developing mutually beneficial personal and professional relationships.

A key part of our proactive outreach effort is veterans Stand Downs. MACV organizes six annual Stand Down events throughout the state. Through the Stand Downs, MACV is able engage veterans and coordinate services onsite. MACV served over 1,750 veterans at Stand Downs in 2011.

**Veteran/Participant Engagement**

A comprehensive intake plan is used for all potential participants. Veterans are assessed not only for employment needs, but also housing, transportation, legal and health/medical issues, as these are barriers that have a direct correlation to successful employment outcomes.

MACV promotes independent accountability for program participants. This leads to empowerment, not enabling. MACV provides veterans one-to-one case management services and staff work with veteran clients to develop plans for both short and long-term careers – not just one job. This is an important strategy, especially for those who are experiencing homelessness, because this population tends to focus only on the “here and now” without considering a plan for the future. Through a proactive case management process, including individual accountability, confidence develops – and this is what helps veterans to believe successful employment is possible again. The accountability focuses on completing tasks related to their employment goals. These tasks include working on resumes and cover letters, submitting applications, and participating in job club workshops.

Connections are made for HVRP participants with the local Workforce Center. Workforce Centers can be overwhelming to veterans transitioning from homelessness due to the self-direction that is often needed and the wide menu of services from which to choose. Rather than simply “handing off” a veteran to the workforce Center’s DVOP, MACV staff provides a hands-on orientation so the veteran is comfortable accessing the many resources provided at the center.

To ensure each veteran is working toward self-sufficiency (and not program reliance), a weekly meeting between MACV staff and the veteran includes a review of their follow-through and understanding why that may not have happened and what more needs to be done so they take better control. A lot of listening takes place – listening to the veteran to better understand their particular needs and goals (does the veteran need a job RIGHT NOW or can they afford to hold out for a more long-term career?). An employment development plan is developed by case manager and veteran together, and contains action steps so the veteran is clear on next steps.

While employment is part of every conversation (beginning with the first meeting), it is not always the first thing that gets discussed. Housing, criminal history, substance abuse history, family status, and anything that might explain why they are experiencing obstacles to employment are also discussed. Meetings can take place under a bridge or in the MACV office. First meetings are pretty intensive in order to evaluate job-readiness, figure out how to remove barriers to housing and employment, and nail down a timetable and action plan.

An organizational mantra is "We can't work harder than the veteran." Lasting success is dependent on the veteran's own sense of accountability and drive, virtues which are rewarded in tangible ways through the
program as well. For example, if the veteran demonstrates a real desire to find work and keep in touch with staff, he or she can earn gas cards or bus cards for job searches.

**Employer Engagement**

MACV considers employers as much a customer as the veteran. MACV engages the local business community by inviting employers to speak at veterans’ job club. Personal networks are also used to get to know local ‘Vet friendly’ businesses. When local businesses offer a donation through a corporate responsibility or philanthropy program, MACV follows up with the company to encourage the hiring of at least one veteran – and offers ongoing, customized support that focuses on both the veteran and the business. These strategies help to solidify long-term and trusting relationships, and help to ensure that if there are any issues, they can be addressed before it becomes an emergency.

Employer engagement, especially when engaging on behalf of veterans with criminal histories, ultimately comes down to trust and reassurance (face-to-face) that they can call you if they have a problem. *You cannot simply find a "felon-friendly" employer and ship them resumes.* Engagement is all about the long-term relationship – and recognizing that not every relationship will be successful. It is important that employers understand MACV’s programs, the risk and the rewards. Staff must also be flexible in meeting employers when it works for them, and be open to feedback.

**Employment Outcome Expectations**

Due to the nature, extent and number of the types of barriers often experienced by homeless veterans, it is important to ask veterans for their transportation, housing and health needs prior to a first job placement. MACV experiences better retention rates when focusing on third and fourth quarter placements because this allows program staff and program participants to lay the right internal and external groundwork, develop trusting relationships with the veterans in the program, and spend the necessary time developing needed supports and employer partnerships.

Relationships built on trust help the veteran to see their time with MACV not just as a job-seeking process, but also as a chance for overall personal growth, and for the rediscovery of one's dreams and ambitions. While self-employment is not an outcome measure for HVRPs, dreams should never be squashed. One MACV veteran participant got a job, but started a moving business on the side (he got insurance and licensing for moving and snow plowing). He has since been hired to move things at the Stand Down events and help clients move into new housing. He also provides snowplowing services for clients and partners organizations. While not a completely self-sustaining business (yet), this endeavor has helped this veteran to make a positive contribution to his community – and has helped him to work from homelessness to a true success story.
Ohio Valley Goodwill Industries

Overall Keys to Success

Ohio Valley Goodwill Industries works in tandem alongside other community partners with a shared vision: helping veterans who are homeless. On average, staff work with approximately ten different agencies daily. The success of the Ohio Valley Goodwill Industries Homeless Veterans Reintegration Program is due to this coordinated service structure. From transportation to workforce training to Stand Down activities, it is Goodwill’s goal to do whatever it takes to help a veteran get back on his or her feet and back to work.

Goodwill Industries believes the top five reasons they are successful include the following: (1) working with other agencies and “meeting them where they’re at” (in other words—treating all veterans with dignity and respect, regardless of their situation, and being less prescriptive and more creative in service provision); (2) understanding the significant value networking brings; (3) recognizing that staff and counselors may have their own attitudes and preconceived notions of this population; (4) employer follow-up; and (5) focusing on a veteran’s skills in terms of the future and not his or her past.

Auxiliary Service Strategies for Targeted Populations

Goodwill Industries works effectively with targeted veteran populations, including female veterans, veterans with criminal histories, and those with disabilities.

Female veterans: Safety and trust is established first. Many female veterans are uncomfortable discussing their problems from the military or those that they are dealing with currently. Staff uses a holistic interview and assessment approach to try to identify service needs before immediately delving into personal issues (e.g., if children are a part of the picture, are there childcare needs, etc.). Goodwill has developed the support of agencies such as the YWCA, and as often as possible, Goodwill works to ensure that a female counselor—a female veteran if it is feasible—takes the lead. Connecting to the local Continuum of Care is also an important part in Goodwill's services to female veterans and veterans with families.

Veterans with criminal justice involvement: Services are divided between felonies and misdemeanors—or those crimes that would be viewed as “hard core” (gun offenses, sexual offenses, etc.) and those that are less “frightening” (disturbing the peace, vagrancy, etc.). An intervention-based technique is typically used for job development that begins with going into the community with the client and talking individually with employers. An intervention-based technique simply means that staff may “intervene” in the hiring process. As an example, staff might go to a store manager or a regional manager whose company “only hires over the Internet,’ and ask him or her to speak to the veteran first. The main idea is to “intervene” on the veteran’s behalf, when a person is very likely to be rejected if he or she uses the company’s “traditional” procedure. Often a question asked is, “Would you be willing to talk to a veteran?” It is not a good idea to simply ask someone to hire a veteran, since the person will most likely say, “just go through our normal procedures…”
Community-based tactics allow Goodwill staff to observe interpersonal interactions and identify potential support needs regarding the job search process, interviewing, and motivation. The organization has found that using computer-based strategies as a primary method (e.g., using the Internet to search for a job or develop interview skills) and/or in lieu of a community-based approach, will very rarely, if ever, lead to success. Additionally, Goodwill has created a strong partnership with agencies offering specialized programming focused on community reintegration of adults with criminal histories.

*Cultural diversity and disability:* Seventy percent of Cincinnati is African American, so not a great deal of thought or planning goes into culturally diverse recruiting strategies - diversity happens naturally enough to be taken for granted. Strong connections do exist with the African American churches in the area, as spirituality is sometimes the missing link for veterans lacking a sense of community, and these organizations can provide another type of support to help the veteran get back on track. Goodwill as an agency has a long history of supporting people with disabilities. The parent organization tends to have a number of peripheral projects based on the Americans with Disabilities legislation. Most importantly, Goodwill is an employer and can be an excellent source for employment opportunities for veterans participating in HVRPs across the country.

**Staffing**

Ohio Valley Goodwill Industries has a number of different staff concentrations co-located in one office: housing, supportive services, and employment. The organization also has satellite offices stationed within other agencies in the community. This way the organization feels it can best address veterans’ complex and interrelated needs. By being involved with other agencies, staff is able to build community cohesion and respond better as a team if and when a crisis presents itself.

Most of the staff at Goodwill are individuals who have come from agencies that have partnered with the organization previously. This familiarity with Goodwill’s services tends to help reduce staff training time and lessens the learning curve that is often obvious in new staff when working with this population. The agency holds communication skills as the number one quality in all of their employees. The second most important quality is street/in-the-field experience – with a focus on experience with homelessness and veterans. Goodwill also takes seriously generational and gender differences among veterans and tries to employ a diverse veteran population to ensure they can best reach their customer base.

The HVRP staff at Goodwill does not turn over (the length of employment ranges from two years to nineteen years, with an average tenure of 11.6 years). One of the main reasons for this longevity includes the fact that all staff has access to resources. Due to Goodwill’s partners and funds from other sources (HUD, county, VA, etc.), requests for items for veterans (interview clothing, for example), can be approved very quickly (often within a day). This equates to less frustration and burnout.

Staff is also encouraged to find ways within the organization to use the additional skills they bring to the table or to develop new ones. One staff person has become the “go to” person for computer networking, while others have developed grant-writing skills. Staff is offered the latitude to do and try new things.

**Continuum of Care Network Connections**

Goodwill is tightly enmeshed with the Ohio Valley Continuum of Care (COC), which is very well organized. Items of need can be requested online and a Homeless Management Information System
(HMIS) helps to track service provision and coordination. One of the greatest benefits of working within the Continuum of Care network is the fact that it has helped to change the attitudes of many of the area’s service providers. Whereas a “protecting your turf” mentality has historically been the norm, the coordinated service structure has dramatically changed that way of thinking – and has led to better outcomes for the veterans served. In fact, two Goodwill staff chair COC committees, and two other staff have held significant positions in the community; one on the Board of Directors of the Homeless Coalition, and another as the Director of a Homeless Coalition.

Due to Goodwill’s connection to the COC network, the Cincinnati COC asked Goodwill to become a partner for the VA’s Supportive Services for Veteran Families (SSVF) grant. In addition, the COC chose Goodwill to run an $875,000 “transitional leasing pool” grant when the COC found itself with extra Pro-rata dollars (HUD), so the financial value has been exceptional.

In terms of outcomes (beyond the obvious expanded resources), it has become commonplace that any community agency working within the COC network calls Goodwill when in contact with anyone who has served a day on active duty.

One of the greatest outcomes of being connected to the COC is the resource-sharing component. This means that only one COC agency acts as payees for homeless persons, only one agency specializes in rapid rehousing, and only one agency really focuses on employment. This truly makes for coordinated and community-based, non-duplicating service structures.

**Partnership Development**

Goodwill begins partnership development by asking potential partners what they need and then carefully figures out how the organization, or its current partners, can do something for them. This type of partner outreach better ensures that a new partner regards the organization as a value. Goodwill also invests time working with churches and building partnerships with agencies that need to do outreach. These partnerships have been especially helpful during Stand Downs. Goodwill pays careful attention to documenting partnerships, partnership development, and partnership outcomes – and is always prepared to demonstrate value with statistics and measurements.

While Goodwill has almost no “formal” partnerships, they partner with almost every other agency in the local area. The primary criterion is to answer the question “is there something we can do that would help this other agency,” rather than “what can they do for us?” Over the years, Goodwill has found that helping other agencies leads to their providing help in return. For example, Goodwill provides various types of transitional housing to the clients of the Family Shelter Partnership, and because of this, the partnership performs outreach for Goodwill, gathers documentation of homelessness, usually provides ID’s, and stabilizes the family ahead of time. Without this partnership, Goodwill’s tasks would be at least doubled. Credit is shared – Goodwill takes credit for a successful intake into our transitional housing, while the partnership agency takes credit for a successful exit from their emergency shelter. The person responsible for development is any staffer who can get a relationship with an agency going; thus all staff is responsible for partnership development.
A Focus on Continuous Program and Quality Improvement

Goodwill as an organization is never complacent with current service provisions. Staff is always on the lookout for additional supportive services, including food, money, clothing and transportation resources. This is especially helpful when running a rural grant where services and supports are needed over a wide geographical area. The organization also keeps a watchful eye on the political scene – and remains politically active in ways that will support the sustainability of HVRPs across the country.

In order to streamline the referral, intake, and assessment process, Goodwill takes advantage of a “homeless certificate” provided by the Continuum of Care and homeless shelters in Cincinnati. An online database has been created that “certifies” someone as HUD service eligible. Having access to this information helps Goodwill to cut three to five hours off new intakes – and ensures less duplication of services and a more streamlined process. With regard to the “homeless certificate,” in Cincinnati, only a few agencies perform homeless outreach or manage emergency shelters. Any person on the streets, in an emergency shelter, or meeting any other official definition of homelessness who comes in contact with outreach or a shelter receives an assessment and an intake into VESTA, the HMIS system. This system then generates a computerized ‘homeless certificate’ that remains good while the person is homeless or continues to be eligible for services. Any other agency need only enter the person’s basic data (social security, name, birth date) in the VESTA Computer system in order to have the person officially eligible for services. Therefore, once a person is entered in VESTA, his or her eligibility for HUD services is generated not by another outreach but by the computer system. The certificate is simply a statement that the person is currently homeless and eligible for services. This means that only a few agencies need to do outreach because by entering the homeless person’s data into VESTA, the outreach worker serves all other agencies. For example, Goodwill’s housing project staff is able to verify that a person is completely eligible for services in ten seconds, simply by logging into VESTA. A Goodwill staffer was chairman of the committee that developed this system.

Proactive Outreach

Fortunately, because of the strong partnerships Goodwill has created, there is rarely a need to perform community outreach for HVRP referrals. In fact, because the referral process is strong, a mini-assessment was created as a way to help referring agencies better determine if someone meets the program criteria prior to referral. Of course, if a referral source is in doubt, it is always recommended to refer. The mini-assessment is simply a small list of questions – “has the person ever served on active duty; is the immediate need one that Goodwill can meet; is the need one that Goodwill can refer easily; are the person’s long-range needs appropriate to Goodwill?”

The local churches have been a tremendous source for job opportunities, so staff remains in constant contact. Goodwill’s strongest faith-based partner uses this mini-assessment and it has generated about forty appropriate referrals for various services. The best strategy with the faith-based community is – as it is with all other agencies – simply to see what Goodwill can do to help them reach their goals. Goodwill gathers just as many services from the churches as the organization provides, so both groups benefit greatly.

Finally, the faith-based community comprises a very large number of people who work for various employers, who are managers of companies, or even owners of companies that hire people. This
community is an incredible source of knowledge about jobs and job markets. In fact, twenty to thirty job opportunities for Goodwill’s clients have come from one specific church.

**Veteran/Participant Engagement**

Goodwill uses a spreadsheet to show veteran job seekers the potential economic future of a person relying solely on government benefits. Clients are often shocked when they realize they will not get some “magical larger benefit” when they hit 60 years of age. Goodwill tries to motivate clients by showing them what a future of self-sufficiency could look like. Staff works to build interest and confidence in the veteran during the career search – and help the veteran to always have a career path in mind. By showing a veteran what his or her future can be, staff find veterans to be more motivated to succeed.

Time is spent preparing the veteran for the work environment at a particular company. Temperature, pace, location, noise level, and more are discussed. A strategy that tends to be effective is to ask the veteran job candidate to imagine being the boss and to discuss five things, as the employer that he or she would want the employee to do. This helps to focus on the impact of being late, taking random days off, etc. By working from the standpoint of what the participant wants to have, staff does not use the approach of “you should…” Rather, the focus becomes, “if you want X, then here is the road to X.”

With regard to the transferability of military skills to civilian jobs, many of the military occupational codes do not transfer easily when a long time has passed since last in service. This is especially true of fields such as information technology. Counselors spend a great deal of time talking with the veteran to pull out additional military and other skills that might provide a level of transferability; however, not all skills, attitudes, and ways to develop relationships that worked in the military will work in civilian work settings.

Counselors have found that there is really not one assessment tool that provides all information. Much of it will depend on the immediacy of a person's needs and trying to deal with what is most pressing. For a veteran, time, pace of life, and other priorities differ greatly from when they live on the street to when they are securely housed and in the workplace. Counselors pay close attention to the way a veteran manages the transition from survival mentality to having a stable home and job, and from being in the service to being a veteran in civilian life.

**Employer Engagement**

A lot of good networking happens in churches and veterans groups. One strategy might be to simply ask, "Who do you know that would hire a homeless Vet?" If a company does not have a position available, staff will ask if they know of others who might. In one example, staff visited an HVAC company, and, though that company didn’t have any openings, they referred staff to a plumbing company (which made a job offer). When meeting with churches, we often ask, “What other churches do you have contact with? Do you know people who are running companies?” It is questions like these that make a job counselor more effective.

Goodwill is considering a “reverse” job fair, whereby employers would visit and talk with veterans and ask, “tell me about yourself.” This way an employer could get familiar with one veteran at a time, since that is often how the best job matches are made. This type of event would also allow the veteran the opportunity for focused interaction with an employer, and provide the veteran with much needed
information about the local business community. Veterans would learn about different occupational industries, how local hiring is done, and much more. The information gleaned from this event would also provide the veteran with some of the tools they need for informed career decision-making, and could potentially establish a host of networking possibilities.

It is important when performing job development activities, to have a good reason for reaching out to a company beyond, "Oh, I see you have a job opening." It is very important to know specifics about the employer’s business. Follow up quickly after the meeting with a thank you and keep checking in. Never drop a promise to make contact. Make sure staff is able to convey the benefits to hiring veterans in general, and, for the job candidate in question, some of their specifics, such as how they will get to work, etc. This keeps the relationship honest.

Lastly, Goodwill is engaged with the Local Veterans Employment Representatives and Disabled Veterans Outreach Program specialists at the local job centers, as they often are able to provide very useful information about the job market, new employers in the area, etc. However, Goodwill believes the best source of jobs is networking with people who are employed or with people who are employers. This may be from within the faith-based community as well as many of the social service agencies in the Continuum of Care, a networking source that is often overlooked.

Employment Outcome Expectations

From the start, staff must help veterans to avoid the passive attitude of expecting, "You guys are going to get a job for me." The veteran may not buy into the idea of "You have to get a job." but may buy into his or her own personal needs and wants (a place to live, a car, a big TV, etc.). In one situation, one veteran did not want to work at an airline, until one counselor mentioned that they would get free air travel to go see their children. That made the difference.

Goodwill staff stays in touch with both the veteran and the employer in order to prevent a veteran from reporting that things are going well one day—and then being fired the next because the employer wasn’t happy about one thing or another. For long-term employment outcomes, the veteran has to define long term success in terms of something that he or she wants – a lifestyle of homelessness tends to be very short-term oriented. Goodwill tries to provide small, short-term success incentives (DVD player, etc.), and do a better job trumpeting and celebrating success. Goodwill’s counseling staff work with employers to keep a door open and keep an open line of communication with them in the hopes that they will contact staff before job loss occurs.

Overall, the best tool for retention is to stay in touch with the employer, whenever and however possible. The best retention tool regarding the veteran is to provide immediate reward and gratification to him or her, if possible. Extra help with transportation or clothing could function as a reward. Other agencies have had success with fast-food gift cards as well. The key is to make the veteran feel rewarded as soon as possible.

Also important is for the job developers to be ready when the income from a job may lead to a cut in benefits or an addition to child support payments. Long-term budget planning is critical to have on the table before employment becomes a reality. Additionally, helping the veteran understand that some jobs
are stepping-stones to other jobs is an important concept to develop for positive employment outcomes and improved retention numbers.
Operation Stand Down Nashville, Inc. (OSDN)

Overall Keys to Success

The services provided by Operation Stand Down Nashville, Inc. (OSDN) are a direct outgrowth of Stand Down events sponsored by the organization in years past. After coordinating the events for a number of years, the city requested the organization become a full time agency serving homeless veterans. OSDN is the primary nonprofit resource for Veterans in Middle Tennessee, providing life-changing social services including employment readiness training, placement assistance, transitional housing and coordination of a wide range of services with other agencies. OSDN is committed to a Veterans serving Veterans approach - 26 of its 30 staff members are Veterans. The VA Homeless program and the Substance Abuse Treatment Program maintain workspace at their Veteran Service Center (VSC). Representatives from the VA Regional Office, Social Security Administration, Food Stamps, IRS, Legal Aid and many others regularly come to the VSC to assist Veterans. The extent to which OSDN is highly integrated with and connected to multiple community and public resources is a key to its success.

OSDN believes the five top reasons for the organization’s successful employment outcomes are: (1) ensuring ongoing, proactive community involvement (over 130 service providers attend OSDN Stand Down events and continue to work together throughout the year) and community drives to gather always needed resources like clothes and shoes; (2) dedicated veteran staff – those who are motivated, are business savvy, and can establish trust with community members, including the business community; (3) staying active and present as an organization in any way that helps the homeless veteran population; (4) contributing to the advisory board for the VA hospital and staying close to the Continuum of Care; and (5) "outreach, outreach, outreach."

Auxiliary Service Strategies for Targeted Populations

As a general rule, OSDN’s belief with regard to homeless outreach is to “meet them where they are” – which often means doing outreach in precarious places to engage veterans in services, including employment. This strategy makes it easier to communicate and easier to gain trust. Veterans who are homeless often deny that they are homeless because they believe they can take care of themselves. The military issues everything that a service member needs, except for a home, and so veterans learn to make their “home” wherever they are. When a program serves veterans who are homeless it is important to stay attentive to their life style, routine, and language. OSDN provides a wraparound service support structure; as any population or era of veterans will tend to need services in multiple aspects of their lives, and will typically require a multifaceted approach to delivering services toward their success. A flexible, comprehensive approach that involves partners at the appropriate juncture is a key to OSDN’s success.

Women veterans: Because women are often not identified and don't self-identify as veterans, locating and recruiting women veterans can be a challenge. OSDN’s outreach strategies include building relationships with every homeless provider in the area as well as partnering with the VA hospital women’s clinic. The team makes a concerted effort to help women veterans to feel safe, and will often offer an alternative waiting room for women when the VSC waiting area is filled with men. OSDN employs women veterans on staff, which provides a more welcoming and safe-feeling environment for homeless women veterans. Whenever possible, women veteran staff members assist in the intake process for women veterans.
Having women veterans on staff has helped OSDN’s credibility with homeless female veterans. OSDN has seen an increase in the number of women veterans receiving services over the last two years.

**Veterans with criminal justice backgrounds:** Whenever possible, OSDN initiates contact with veterans prior to release. The organization partners with the county sheriff's office to help veterans manage their transition from jail to community programs. The Nashville Department of Corrections is leading some of these types of programs on their own – and OSDN works closely with them. Outreach also coordinates with the Davidson County Jail and other correction facilities to identify veterans who are due to be released soon. Once released, an employment counselor provides training for veterans on how to present themselves to employers and how to answer some of the typical, tough questions. Outreach also involves working with employers who may be willing to hire veterans with criminal histories. Davidson County Corrections has a program for working with veterans, and their staff works hand-in-hand with OSDN employment counselors to prepare veterans for employment once they are released.

**Cultural diversity:** Employing a diverse staff of predominately veterans, OSDN approaches diversity from a perspective that seeks to unify the veterans on the common ground that they all share - regardless of background. The military is naturally diverse, and going through that experience strips most differences away, therefore “everybody is green.” The organization focuses on learning, working and progressing as a team, which will also include sharing setbacks and leaning on each other through rough times.

**Veterans with disabilities:** OSDN helps Veterans with disabilities file for VA disability claims as needed. Staff begin with the same approach they use for any veteran: meet them where they are, figure out what is needed, what can be provided, and what exists in the community that can be leveraged to assist them. For veterans with disabilities, this means helping them to apply for benefits, and, in some cases, using the Social Security Administration’s Ticket to Work program. Currently 10 tickets have been assigned, with five of those tickets in active status. While there are no positive outcomes to report at this time that directly link to the TTW/EN program, OSDN will continue to operate this program and make adjustments along the way.

**Staffing**

As veterans serving veterans, including job coaches, staff are able to gain a veteran client’s trust faster. In fact, veteran status is a requirement for some positions at OSDN. Veteran counselors are paired with non-veteran staff as mentors and advisors. Employing veteran counselors from all different branches of service helps with translating the nuances of a veteran’s particular experience and skill sets developed while in service. This also becomes helpful with resume development and job matching.

OSDN partners with the Center for Non-Profit Management for free advertising for open staff positions, in addition to providing access to other local and trusted networks. During the hiring/vetting process, personality characteristics as well as skills are screened to ensure a good match with the veteran/client population. Some staff members are former clients who came back after getting back on their feet. The organization also partners with Goodwill Industries to provide ongoing training and certification for staff in employment counseling as well as drug and alcohol abuse counseling.
Professional development for staff is an ongoing focus for OSDN. A monthly “lunch ‘n’ learn” is scheduled where the center is closed to clients and a variety of training opportunities are scheduled for staff. Training might include outside speakers coming in to present to staff, or individual staff or departments presenting new information, tactics, or strategies. Staff are encouraged to participate in local and national webinars and then have the responsibility to report back and share new ideas and information.

Continuum of Care Network Connections

OSDN is a member of the Metro Davidson County Continuum of Care Network (COC), and has been so for the past decade. The organization actively participates in the local GAPS In Services meeting with COC (on a monthly basis), as well as the annual Point in Time Homeless count. Meeting monthly with the COC partners ensures that the community as a whole is continually focused on identifying and shoring up gaps or service needs.

One example of the partnerships OSDN has created within the COC is with Urban Housing Solutions. Since OSDN does not provide permanent housing, this partnership is one of the keys to helping homeless veterans by providing access to permanent and affordable housing. Urban Housing Solutions is not a veteran-specific program, but does participate in the HUD-VASH program.

OSDN is also an active partner with the Key Alliance Homeless Coalition, and as such, partners with the Metropolitan Homelessness Commission to help implement permanent solutions to homelessness.

Additionally, because of OSDN’s active participation with the COC, additional funding sources have been located and secured for an additional staff person to provide employment and supportive services.

Partnership Development

OSDN focuses outreach efforts to veterans and employers, but also to other community organizations as potential partners. The mission of partnering becomes a process of thinking in terms of individuals rather than in terms of populations. The question OSDN tries to answer is, “How can we tailor each veteran’s experience to meet his/her specific needs?”

OSDN has created very strong and successful partnerships with the local Tennessee Department of Labor (TNDOL) and Workforce Development Center, Goodwill and the AMVETS Career Center – all of which provide career development and job assistance programs. A Disabled Veterans Outreach Program specialist works in the office three or more days a week and can assist with unemployment issues, in addition to providing job lists from employers that OSDN might not otherwise have access to; Goodwill offers computer classes and occupational skills training, such as forklift operation; and the AMVETS Career offers online courses and certifications to veterans at no cost.

The organization is able to successfully build partnerships because staff keep in touch, stay active and make sure partnerships are mutually beneficial. It is expected that staff be in the community, meeting and talking with existing partners–and finding new and potential partners as often as possible. One important piece of partnership development for the organization is educating other organizations on the mission and focus of the HVRP program, and why it makes sense to partner with OSDN. Partnering with organizations is no different than working directly with veterans. It boils down to identifying and communicating strengths and gaps, while determining how to complement each other’s efforts in a way that is efficient and productive. OSDN’s partnership process includes methods for taking inventories of
these types of capabilities as part of engaging community organizations in mutually beneficial partnerships.

Conducting proactive partner development is important because community representatives may not know where to find you or you to find them. OSDN stays in touch with its partners, maintains a presence in the community, and follows through. The organization also makes very clear to partners what it can and cannot do, to ensure that veterans are referred for services at the right time, for the right reason, and with no false expectations.

**A Focus on Continuous Program and Quality Improvement**

OSDN keeps a constant focus on continuous program improvement. The organization holds weekly staff meetings where the entire organization comes together to discuss progress and hammers out any interdepartmental conflicts. In addition, weekly follow-up on action items and after-action reports from events and other services are presented to all. The weekly meetings ensure that all staff is accountable in a planned, consistent process and, most importantly, that each team member knows what the other is doing. On Fridays, the office remains closed until 10:00 AM, so that the staff meeting can commence without interruptions. Fridays are devoted to follow-up with clients, employers, employment counselors, and grant-providers. These strategies have helped the organization to remain committed and focused.

Another focus of continuous program and quality improvement is to keep up with the technology of the times. OSDN has created a Facebook presence and many staff have developed LinkedIn profiles and use this technology to reach out to local employers. Staff who are not tech-savvy are also learning how to text, since this is the way many of the younger veterans communicate. Meeting veterans “where they’re at” sometimes takes a staff member out of his/her comfort zone, but because OSDN’s mission is to offer services in the best and most appropriate way for an individual veteran to succeed, staff are determined to successfully meet these new challenges.

**Proactive Outreach**

Part of OSDN’s outreach strategy includes educating current and potential partners on the organization’s programs, requirements for participation, and processes for selecting and/or engaging veteran participants. These steps go a long way to ensuring the organization receives appropriate referrals—one who can best take advantage of OSDN’s program and services. What OSDN looks for in its referring partners is a willingness to focus on an individualized service strategy that address an employment processes tailored to meet each an individual veteran’s needs, and complements his or her current short and long-term goals. Not all partners are willing or able to do that. While this type of proactive outreach may be more challenging or time consuming, it often ensures that partnerships remain in sync and focused on end goals and positive outcomes.

Many staff members involved in job development use LinkedIn as a proactive strategy for reaching local employers. One staff member was recently contacted by a local HR director through LinkedIn and offered her services to coordinate a job preparation workshop one week before a Patriot Partnership Career Fair.
**Veteran/Participant Engagement**

Before using any formal or informal assessments, staff first sit down with the veteran and discuss previous employment and skills, as well as thoughts and desires about jobs (moving forward) and salary needs/requirements. Also discussed are any barriers—physical, criminal history, transportation and others that might interfere with job development, job placement or retention. Staff will also dig down deeper by asking probing, open-ended questions such as: “How does this interfere with work?” “Can you give us some examples?” “When these situations occurred, what did you do to deal with it and was it successful?”

OSDN counselors are very up front with veteran participants—especially when explaining that it is not the staff’s responsibility to ‘get’ the veteran a job. The discussion often includes something similar to the following: “You are going to get yourself a job, but we are going to provide you with some tools to do so.” This allows participants to begin the employment relationship with a sense of ownership—and can be thought of as staff being a passenger/navigator in a car where the veteran is driving. OSDN staff believe that by beginning with this understanding, there tends to be a better chance of helping the veteran understand who really owns the “motivation to work” issue.

**Employer Engagement**

OSDN is constantly striving to cultivate relationships with employers who want to hire qualified individuals. Outreach to the local employer community often consists of researching the Better Business Bureau and attending Chamber of Commerce meetings, print brochures and mailings, phone calls and in person visits.

The Patriot Partnership Program was created as a program designed to keep employers motivated to hire veterans first. Currently 136 employer-members strong, an incentive for employer participation is inclusion on OSDN’s website, and the fact that all services are offered at no cost. Another benefit to the employer community is the fact that OSDN screens and assesses veterans prior to a job referral. Lastly, the organization provides follow-up for nine months (post-placement) and can assist with the purchase of peripheral needs such as work boots, tools, clothing and safety equipment necessary for the job. OSDN had its first quarterly Patriot Partnership Program Career fair in May of 2011 where eight veterans were hired on the spot. Each and every employer participating in a Patriot Partnership Career Fair must guarantee open positions in order to participate.

OSDN has found that many employers have never heard of the **Work Opportunities Tax Credit** (WOTC). Staff not only inform and educate employers about the tax credit and how to apply for it, but OSDN as an organization has gone the extra step and has actually applied for and received the tax credit.

Before any first-time meeting with an employer, OSDN staff research the employer and attempt to answer a series of questions. These questions typically focus on how often the company hires (its process); if the company is locally owned and if hiring decisions are local or corporate; what the company does (if anything) that sets them apart as “veteran-friendly”; and if the company is managed by veterans. These are just some of the questions researched before any preliminary meeting is scheduled—and helps to prove to the employer that OSDN “means business,” does its homework, and can be trusted.
**Employment Outcome Expectations**

In order to plan for positive employment outcomes and solid retention, both hard skills and soft skills training (with a focus on communication skills, conflict resolution and anger management) is a focus. Other aspects considered up front, and before a placement is considered, is skills translation, tools and clothing needed for a particular job or industry, certification/formal training that can be provided through partners, and developing a flex account for major needs like clothing, haircuts, transportation, and more.

OSDN views the HVRP/veteran/employer partnership as one that is long term. Both the veteran and the employer receive support from the organization for no less than nine months after placement. In fact, a job placement does not count as successful (for internal purposes) until the veteran has retained employment for at least nine months. This connection helps the veteran and the employer to understand and believe that OSDN is a trusted partner—one who they can reach out to whenever necessary.
Conclusion

HVRPs, HFVPs and IVTPs across the country are working hard to engage and support veterans who are homeless to obtain, sustain and advance in employment. The four programs spotlighted in this document are only the first of many that the NVTAC will highlight in the months to come. We hope that the information presented here will provide new and improved methods for your program to incorporate so that any veteran who is homeless that wants to work has opportunities and support to achieve their goals.

If you are an HVRP, HFVP or IVTP grantee using innovative strategies and approaches to achieve high level employment outcomes and would like to be highlighted in future Spotlights, please let us know.

For further information or questions about this Spotlight or the BBI-NVTAC, contact:

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