

**VA San Diego Healthcare System's HUD-VASH Aftercare Team –  
Preventing Returns to Homelessness**

An Innovative Practice in VHA Homeless Program Operations

**White Paper**

**VA**



U.S. Department  
of Veterans Affairs

## INTRODUCTION

The VHA Homeless Programs Office identifies and disseminates innovative practices in homeless program operations. The VA San Diego Healthcare System has been identified as a site with an innovative practice in providing aftercare services for Veteran graduates of the Housing and Urban Development-VA Supportive Housing (HUD-VASH) program.

Nationwide, the number of homeless Veterans is continuing to decline, showing a 55% decrease between 2010 and 2022. What this number does not represent is the Veterans who return to homelessness after obtaining permanent housing through a VA homeless program. There are countless reasons that a Veteran may return to homelessness: losing income, using their limited resources to care for a friend or family member, or experiencing high medical costs themselves, to name a few. Though these Veterans may have initially found a permanent housing situation, they may find themselves needing to reengage with VA homeless programs.

Such was the case at the VA San Diego Health Care System, where, in 2016, it was discovered that many Veterans who had successfully graduated from their local HUD-VASH program later had their Housing Choice Vouchers – which provide them with rental subsidies that make their housing affordable – terminated for administrative reasons. For context, each year, Veterans receiving rental subsidies through HUD-VASH must verify and recertify their family composition and income with their local Public Housing Agency (PHA). This is a routine process that all voucher holders go through to continue receiving subsidies. HUD-VASH case managers often help Veterans with their [recertification](#) processes, making sure that forms are filled out correctly and on time. However, Veterans who have graduated from HUD-VASH after successfully completing their case management goals no longer receive the intensive case management services HUD-VASH traditionally provides. So, while these Veterans continue to benefit from the rental subsidies provided by the vouchers, they often do not feel like they can ask for help when it is time for recertification.

In investigating the problem, the homeless program leaders at the San Diego VA discovered that many vouchers were terminated due to minor oversights in recertification paperwork, such as unchecked boxes or missing signatures, or due to minor violations of PHA rules that were easy to resolve. As an



alarming result, many of these successfully housed Veterans found themselves facing homelessness again.

In response, over the years that followed, the San Diego VA worked to provide more structured support to HUD-VASH-graduated Veterans during their vulnerable recertification time. These improvements eventually led to the creation of the HUD-VASH Graduate Aftercare Policy and Team.

## **PRACTICE OVERVIEW**

The full Graduate Aftercare Policy can be found in Appendix A of this paper. Its development started in 2016 with a push from the San Diego VA's HUD-VASH team to increase regular communication and coordination meetings with 3 PHAs in their catchment area. These increased touchpoints gave the HUD-VASH team increase visibility into housing concerns that participating Veterans faced, such as "pay" or "quit" notices, failed [Housing Quality Standards](#) inspections, issues with property managers or neighbors, and mental health crises. With increased visibility into issues that threatened Veterans' tenancy, the HUD-VASH team was able to provide time-limited case management support to resolve those issues and keep the Veterans housed.

The next improvement happened in 2017 when the San Diego VA's homeless program leadership moved to standardize their outreach and follow-up processes to their HUD-VASH-graduated Veterans. By the following year, the San Diego VA dedicated 2 HUD-VASH case managers to graduate follow-up, offering a safety net to prevent housing crises and returns to homelessness.

Each year that followed provided more data and evidence in favor of even more support for HUD-VASH graduate Veterans. By 2019, the San Diego VA was able to acquire additional staff positions to create an entire Aftercare Team focused solely on providing aftercare to help HUD-VASH-graduated Veterans maintain their housing. A housing specialist was added to the team to support Veterans when they needed to move residences for voluntary or involuntary circumstances to prevent them from returning to homelessness. A PHA liaison was also added to streamline and increase capacity for weekly coordination with their partner PHAs.



In 2021, the San Diego VA developed and implemented its HUD-VASH Graduate Aftercare Policy to outline the standardized procedures for outreach support for graduated Veterans. This was paired with an additional HUD-VASH Graduation and Discharge Policy, available in Appendix B of this paper, which clarified the difference between graduation and traditional program discharges when Veterans would no longer receive rental subsidies.

As San Diego's HUD-VASH Veterans accomplished their case management goals and prepared for graduation, they were educated on the support the Aftercare Team would provide and when contacts would be made: 90 days, 6 months, and 1 year after graduation, and annually thereafter.

Typically, if a HUD-VASH-graduated Veteran needs short-term intensive support, the Aftercare Team works with them for up to 6 months. If a Veteran needs longer-term support to stabilize housing, they are readmitted to traditional HUD-VASH case management. In the unfortunate event that a Veteran requires intensive case

management within 6 months of graduating, they are considered prematurely graduated and their program exit gets canceled. The Veteran gets reassigned to their former HUD-VASH case manager for support.

In addition to their role as short-term case managers, Aftercare Team members provide ongoing training to HUD-VASH staff on best practices and policies for graduation and discharges as well as how to effectively complete voucher recertifications.

*"An incomplete recertification is seldom just an incomplete recertification. It's often a symptom of the problem. If you dig a little deeper, you uncover how a Veteran was struggling with various issues, such as age-related cognitive decline, declining physical health, unmanaged mental health, substance use, lack of social supports, financial problems, and insufficient resources."*

**Sumaya Dinglasan**  
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## CONCLUSION

The establishment of the San Diego VA HUD-VASH Aftercare Team increased Veteran and staff confidence in the graduation process, as they knew Veterans would be contacted at set intervals and assisted as needed. This also alleviated capacity constraints for case manager caseloads.

San Diego HUD-VASH is a large program. As of June 2023, approximately 1,751 Veterans were housed with rental subsidies. HUD-VASH-graduated Veterans comprised approximately 47% of these vouchers. In fiscal year (FY) 2021, the Aftercare Team assisted with 161 voucher recertifications and made 874 outreach calls. In FY 2022, the Aftercare Team assisted with 378 voucher recertifications and made 1,101 outreach calls. These touchpoints continue to grow as more Veterans graduate from case management.

The impact on housing retention is notable, as PHAs no longer terminate vouchers without consulting with the HUD-VASH PHA liaison. The outreach efforts, combined with short-term case management, have significantly reduced voucher loss and program recidivism. This is critical, as there are significant costs associated with rehousing a Veteran who has returned to homelessness: interim housing for the Veteran, loss of the Veteran's personal property, reprioritized HUD-VASH and PHA resources, and limited community security deposit assistance. Currently, in San Diego, the cost to rehouse a Veteran is upwards of \$6,000. This estimate does not account for HUD-VASH or PHA staffing hours, but reflects the cost related to the security deposit and other moving fees. Most importantly, these aftercare interventions have significantly reduced the negative emotional toll that housing instability can have on Veterans.

Aftercare services can be implemented regardless of the size of the HUD-VASH program. The keystones of the Aftercare Team's services include regular communication with PHA partners, ongoing outreach efforts to graduated Veterans, and intensive short-term HUD-VASH case management interventions. In San Diego, Aftercare services have been proven to be essential in the prevention of Veteran returns to homelessness.

We would like to thank the dedicated staff at the San Diego VA for sharing their practice with us. For more information, please contact [HomelessVets@va.gov](mailto:HomelessVets@va.gov).



## APPENDIX A: HUD-VASH GRADUATE AFTERCARE POLICY

### HUD-VASH Graduate Aftercare Policy (GAP)

1. **PURPOSE:** To define the policies and procedures for aftercare support for those Veterans that enter graduation status.
2. **POLICY:** It is a VHA policy that aftercare services are available and provided to HUD-VASH program graduates that have retained their HUD-VASH voucher. VASH case managers will remain available to provide case management services to Graduates if needed in an effort to support housing stability.
3. **DEFINITIONS:**
  - a. **Graduates:** Veterans that have exited from case management services but still retain their HUD-VASH voucher.
  - b. **Referrals:** Referrals are notifications of Graduates that may be in need of case management support in order to maintain their current housing or VASH voucher. Referrals are received from points of contact which include but are not limited to local Public Housing Authorities (PHA), landlords, the Homeless Patient Aligned Care Team (HPACT), homeless outreach, and graduates' self-referral.
    - (1) The majority of referrals are related to Veterans who have submitted their recertification packets incomplete and/or overdue to the PHA's.
    - (2) The second type of referral is when a Veteran is in the process of moving from one apartment to the next. Most of the Veterans are homeless and run the risk of losing their vouchers if they do not notify the PHA to extend their time before it expires.
    - (3) The third type of referral pertains to Veterans facing eviction and or engaging in behaviors that can lead to possible eviction (i.e., non-payment of rent, mental health, and substance abuse issues).
    - (4) The fourth type of referral consists of names from the PHA's of Veterans that have upcoming re-certifications due within 60 days.
4. **RESPONSIBILITIES:** The role of the Aftercare Team is to consistently and effectively communicate with PHAs, triage and assign referrals received from PHAs; and ensure HOMES data is accurate and up to date. The Aftercare Team assesses Veterans that are having housing instability issues; identifies general case management needs; and determines which type of case management support is required to stabilize their housing. Responsibilities of the Aftercare Team include:
  - a. Contact graduates at the time of PHA recertification to offer assistance with this process.



- b. Receive referrals and identify emergent issues that determine a quick response time. If it is determined that the referral is non-emergent, then a follow-up will be scheduled within two business days.
  - c. Participate in regular and ongoing communication with the PHAs to increase communication between VASH case managers and the PHA housing specialists.
  - d. Update HOMES of all readmissions and monitor to see who has been exited from the VASH program.
  - e. Reconcile the HOMES data to ensure that our housing numbers are accurate and consistent with the PHA's.
  - f. Develop a list of recently graduated Veterans to determine when to initiate a 90-day, 6-month and 1-year follow-up.
  - g. Notify the PHA if a Veteran is opened for another HUD-VASH case management episode.
  - h. Document in the electronic medical record and update HOMES as needed.
5. PROCEDURES: The Aftercare Team provides professional assessment and services to graduated Veterans, families, and significant others. Referrals are made through various sources including Public Housing Authorities, VA providers, landlords, and graduate self-referral in an effort to preserve the Veteran's housing.
- a. Aftercare Team screens Veterans to determine if they are at risk for housing instability and assesses for safety concerns and Veteran's need for crisis intervention.
  - b. If the graduate has a graduation date of fewer than six months and their presenting clinical needs warrant ongoing clinical support, the graduate is assigned back to their original case manager. If the prior case manager cannot take the case back the Veteran will be assigned to a new case manager.
  - c. An assessment by the Aftercare Team determines which type of case management support is required, brief, non-intensive versus crisis intervention with re-admission for long-term case management support.
    - (1) The first, brief, non-intensive case management support has an expected time frame for resolution of identified issues being at most two to four weeks. These cases are not currently reopened in HOMES and a Housing Stability Plan is not required for this intervention. Veterans may receive assistance from the Aftercare Team during this period of time.
    - (2) Veterans that are determined to be in crisis require immediate intervention within 24-48 hours. These cases are intensive often requiring multiple interventions per week to extinguish the immediate crisis. Once the crisis is stabilized, Veteran is reopened for case management and transferred to either a short-term aftercare case manager for stabilization



for a period of no longer than six months or to an intensive VASH case management team if stabilization is expected to exceed six months based on clinical assessment.

(3) Veterans may be transferred for long-term VASH case management at any point in the initial or short-term phase if it is determined that intensive support is needed to resolve case management needs.

(4) Housing specialist to support Aftercare Team with rehousing Veterans and provide additional case management support as needed.

(5) Weekly Aftercare clinical team meetings will determine the timeframe for the appropriate transition to an intensive case manager.

d. Recertification and Inspection – Aftercare Team contacts the Veteran by phone to offer assistance with the recertification and inspection process as needed.

6. REFERENCES:

a. VHA DIRECTIVE 1162.05(1): HOUSING AND URBAN DEVELOPMENT DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS SUPPORTIVE HOUSING PROGRAM





## APPENDIX B: HUD-VASH GRADUATION AND DISCHARGE POLICY

### HUD-VASH GRADUATION AND DISCHARGE POLICY

1. PURPOSE: To define the policies and procedures for HUD-VASH Graduation and Discharge.
2. POLICY: It is the intent of the HUD-VASH program to move homeless Veterans into permanent housing with supportive services. When a Veteran no longer needs case management, he/she should be graduated to live independently. Some Veterans may also be discharged because they are unsuccessful in HUD- VASH. These discharges should occur as a last resort. Per VHA Directive 1162.05(1), case managers may Graduate or Discharge Veterans from the HUD- VASH program when certain criteria are met.
3. DEFINITIONS:
  - a. Graduation: Graduation from HUD-VASH is defined as exit from case management after the Veteran has achieved optimal functioning and demonstrates the ability to live independently in the community but is retaining their HUD- VASH voucher for financial stability.
  - b. Discharge: Discharge from HUD-VASH is defined as exit from case management due to the voucher being relinquished or revoked. The Public Housing Authority (PHA) will initiate termination of assistance according to HUD regulations. Veterans may also be discharged from HUD-VASH due to adverse circumstances such as non-compliance with case management.
4. RESPONSIBILITIES: The role of the VASH case manager is to consult with the Veteran, their assigned HUD-VASH team, and other relevant providers to determine when the Veteran is ready to graduate or discharge from case management based on the following criteria.
  - a. Graduating Veteran:
    - (1) Voices a desire to graduate from HUD-VASH case management.
    - (2) Has been stably housed for at least one year, as evidenced by adherence to the lease agreement.
    - (3) Is knowledgeable of the recertification process with the PHA.
    - (4) Utilizes knowledge and abilities in a crisis situation to access VA and/or community resources and services to address the crisis.
    - (5) Is connected with primary care, mental health, and specialty services as applicable and has made progress on self-defined goals as evidenced by treatment plan reviews and other documentation.
    - (6) Demonstrates financial responsibility as evidenced by sustainable income and timely payment of rent and bills.



(7) Has developed appropriate relationships with neighbors and landlord.

b. Discharging Veteran:

(1) Veteran who is over income and no longer qualifies for HUD subsidy.

(2) Veteran surrenders voucher due to needing a higher level of care, moves to be with family or other circumstances.

(3) Veteran refuses, despite all efforts, to engage in case management or is lost to contact.

c. Veteran participates in behaviors that are adverse enough to result in eviction from the unit or arrest, resulting in voucher revocation by the PHA. Eviction and/or behavior resulting in legal issues should not be an automatic cause for discharge and VASH staff should use their clinical judgment and attempt to determine if proactive case management services can help mitigate circumstances that negatively affected housing stability.

5. GRADUATION PLANNING: Graduation Planning in HUD-VASH is reflective of a recovery-oriented system of care and is based on the needs and aspirations of the Veteran. Things to consider when planning for graduation include:

a. Determination of readiness to end case management will be a joint decision between the Veteran, their care management team, and other relevant providers that work with the Veteran.

b. Veteran will have different levels of acuity and their goals will vary based on their wants and needs, so each Veteran will be assessed individually.

c. Additional factors to be considered in graduation planning and assessment may include, but are not limited to:

(1) If the Veteran has an initial housing recertification within 90 days of graduation, the case manager will wait until after recertification for graduation.

(2) Demonstrates the ability to independently complete housing recertification packet.

(3) Adheres to the terms of the lease and to Public Housing Authority guidelines.

(4) Has sustainable income:

(i) Employment

(ii) SSI/SSDI/SSA

(iii) VA Benefits

(iv) Pension



(v) Self-employment

(5) Food Stability

(6) Veteran has no active Suicidal Ideation/Homicidal Ideation or Command Auditory Hallucinations that impact their ability to live safely in the community.

(7) No psychiatric hospitalizations for a sustained period of time prior to discharge.

(8) Substance abuse and/or mental health issues do not affect his/her housing stability.

(9) Veteran is able to manage Activities of Daily Living (or has assistance in place).

(10) Veteran has family and/or community supports in place.

(11) Veteran must have sustained a low acuity level as evidenced by being placed in the Preparation for Discharge Stage of case management in the Homeless Operations Management and Evaluation System (HOMES).

6. DISCHARGE PLANNING: If it is determined that the Veteran will be discharged from the HUD-VASH program, the Veteran must be notified in writing as soon as possible. Appropriate alternatives such as Supportive Services for Veteran Families (SSVF) rapid re-housing or Grant and Per Diem transitional housing should be explored if the Veteran will not be able to maintain housing without the voucher.

a. PROCEDURES:

(1) Case managers must document in CPRS and in HOMES when a Veteran graduates or is discharged from the program.

(2) All members of the Veteran's VASH care team will be co-signed on the graduation or discharge summary note in CPRS.

(3) Case managers must notify the Public Housing Authority with a letter when a Veteran graduates or is discharged.

(4) Case manager will inform Veteran of their next housing recertification date.

(5) Case managers will provide Veteran with a VA resources guide and HUD-VASH trifold discharge brochure.

(6) Case manager will notify graduating Veteran of HUD-VASH aftercare services.

7. REFERENCE:



- a. VHA Directive 1162.05(1): “Housing and Urban Development Department of Veterans Affairs Supportive Housing Program,” June 29, 2017
- b. “HUD-VASH Stages of Case Management and Minimum Visit Requirements”
- c. VA Capitol Health Care Network, VISN 5, Guidance 10N5-GUIDE-CMO- 05: “Guidance, Housing and Urban Development-VA Supportive Housing (HUD-VASH) Graduation,” August 5, 2014

