

Engaging Frontline Providers in Efforts to End Veteran Homelessness

An Innovative Practice in VHA Homeless Program Operations

White Paper

VA



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of Veterans Affairs

Developed by
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INTRODUCTION

The VHA Homeless Program Office identifies and disseminates innovative practices in homeless program operations. The Clinical Operations section of the Homeless Program Office (HPO), in partnership with Community Solutions's Built for Zero (BFZ) Initiative, has developed an innovative practice for engaging frontline homeless service providers in community-wide efforts to end Veteran homelessness.

PRACTICE OVERVIEW

In our collective efforts to end Veteran homelessness, it has been customary for communities to establish homeless service system improvement teams responsible for effectively coordinating efforts, identifying and implementing system improvements, and monitoring and communicating progress towards the ultimate goal. While members often vary in role and number, these teams commonly feature Continuum of Care (CoC) leaders, representatives from the local VA Medical Center's (VAMC) homeless program, executive directors of partner non-profit provider agencies, and key invested stakeholders. For small to mid-sized communities, the improvement team's members often represent most, if not all, of the providers and services within the community. Understandably, when successes are realized in these smaller sized communities, it is often due to their ability to keep everyone on task and moving in the same direction. For larger cities, however, the challenge of coordination can be exponentially more complex as "everyone" includes significantly more people.

Improvement teams in larger cities often have too few members to accurately reflect relevant stakeholders in the community and lack wide representation from all levels of the system: executive leadership, middle management, and frontline staff. Generally made up of representatives at executive and middle management levels, these members frequently do not have the concrete field experience needed to generate high-leverage improvement ideas nor do they effectively engage frontline workers. This is critical in large-scale efforts. Conversely, it is often difficult for frontline staff to feel connected to nationwide efforts to end Veteran homelessness and understand how their day-to-day activities concretely impact those efforts. When community-wide opportunities for technical assistance and consultation arise, that would not only provide emotional connection to the high-level mission but also provide important improvement science skills, these opportunities are most commonly offered to community leadership. Guidance and expertise are then expected to trickle down to the case managers, social workers, housing navigators, and others who touch the system directly. However, if this information is not effectively disseminated, or if insights from frontline workers are not incorporated, it is difficult to plan and implement projects that successfully improve processes and outcomes. This poses a unique and important challenge – increase the reach and capacity of large city improvement teams while also mobilizing and incorporating insights from the people closest to the work. Seeking to address this challenge, in fiscal year (FY) 2019, staff from the BFZ Initiative partnered with HPO to develop a strategic planning model explicitly aimed at engaging



and activating frontline homeless service providers in process improvement science – the “Frontline Onsite Meeting”.

At its core, the Frontline Onsite Meeting had two concrete objectives: form a truly community-wide improvement team and leverage the wisdom and experience of the team’s members towards accelerating efforts to end Veteran homelessness. Co-facilitated by representatives from BFZ along with representatives from HPO, it was structured as a seven-hour, all-day event with two discrete sections. The morning section focused heavily on community-wide relationship building, providing background information on national initiatives and milestones for achieving an effective end to Veteran homelessness, and highlighting local progress and areas of focus. The afternoon section took the information and lessons from the morning to guide frontline providers in a democratic process to develop projects in service of improving their system. Each meeting concluded with a plan to communicate status updates on the agreed upon improvement projects as well as a process to generate new projects based on the unused ideas that were surfaced. When scheduling permitted, regional and national leaders such as Veterans Integrated Service Network (VISN) Network Homeless Coordinators (NHCs), Housing and Urban Development-VA Supportive Housing (HUD-VASH) Regional Coordinators, and Supportive Service for Veteran Families (SSVF) Regional Coordinators attended and served as subject matter experts (SMEs) to clarify rules and reinforce national priorities and initiatives. A detailed overview of the meeting format has been provided in Appendix A of this paper.

“Frontline meetings were an opportunity to lean into the co-creation work that we talk about. We had an opportunity to acknowledge that the people who know the most about the system are those who implement or interact with it on a day-to-day basis. And what we’ve learned through this is that frontline staff not only have insights into the solutions to barriers, but they also implement the improvements more effectively and passionately because they’ve bought-in to the development process.

K.O. Campbell
Large City Strategy Lead
Built for Zero

The first version of the meeting took place in Detroit, MI in January 2019. Over the course of the year, the model was continuously improved upon as it was deployed in Cook County, IL; Jacksonville, FL; Denver, CO; Phoenix, AZ; Washington, D.C.; St. Louis, MO; and Charlotte, NC. In the months that followed each meeting, not only did the identified improvements take shape, but new projects based on the other ideas presented were also initiated. In Phoenix, a Frontline inspired project led to a 94% decrease in actively homeless non-VHA eligible chronically homeless Veterans and a 66% decrease in Veterans staying in transitional housing longer than six months. The Frontline Onsite in Charlotte helped the community understand the major challenges that

arose by having separate VA and CoC managed BNLs and planned a project to merge the two. Jacksonville's Frontline Onsite led to a community-funded cell phone distribution pilot to ensure that Veterans connected to resources could be reliably contacted.

In addition to generating improvement projects, these communities saw other benefits. In Detroit, frontline staff submitted reports and data more frequently and accurately to their local BNL and HMIS database, having new understanding on their significance in the community's efforts. At Cook County, social workers at the Edward J. Hines VA Hospital inpatient units better understood diversion and prevention principles and coordinated closer with the local VA homeless program in providing care to unstably housed Veterans. Most importantly, across Detroit, Jacksonville, and Charlotte, new members from different agencies and organizations joined their respective improvement teams. These new members included people who do the day-to-day work with Veterans experiencing homelessness.

CONCLUSION

When the staff who work directly with Veterans were socialized to performance improvement practices, felt that their ideas were taken seriously to the point of being tested as improvement projects, and gained a sense of connectedness to the work done by their community, the focus, energy, and quality of the work improved. To finish the job in ending Veteran homelessness, communities need informed ideas to address real barriers and challenges, with solutions enacted by engaged and motivated frontline providers.

We would like to thank the Built for Zero Initiative and the Clinical Operations section of the VHA Homeless Program Office for sharing their practice with us. If you have questions about this practice, please contact K.O. Campbell, Large City Strategy Lead, Built for Zero at KCampbell@community.solutions, or Shawn Liu, Program Analyst, VHA National Homeless Program Office at Shawn.Liu@va.gov.



APPENDIX A: MEETING OVERVIEW AND CONSIDERATIONS

PRE-MEETING ACTIVITIES

Preparation for a Frontline Onsite Meeting began in the weeks prior to the event date, with members of a given community's self-identified leadership team handling planning and logistics. Lists of possible attendees were generated and a meeting space large enough to accommodate was identified. As the day was geared primarily for frontline providers, considerations were made to ensure that as many providers could attend while minimizing negative impacts on operations. In some instances, this meeting was delivered over the course of two days, with half of the providers attending one of the days. Here, "provider" was defined loosely and included not only case managers, social workers, and housing navigators, but also any other professions or disciplines that engaged with Veterans experiencing homelessness such as peer support specialists, nurses, vocational specialists, recreation therapists, physicians, and others. Necessary materials and equipment included projectors and projector screens, flip chart paper, markers, pens, sticky note pads, adhesive dots, and refreshments.

WELCOME AND FRAMING

On the day of the meeting, local leaders from either the CoC or city and county government gave opening remarks to demonstrate support for the day and highlight the importance of frontline staff in generating system improvements. Next, the co-facilitators walked the participants through the agenda and reiterated the purpose and mission for the day – that frontline providers are often left out of the planning process for large scale systems efforts and this was the opportunity for correction. This section also outlined the primary objectives and outcomes desired: an understanding of the community's goals towards ending Veteran homelessness, a list of projects to improve the system, a plan on how to communicate progress back to the community, and a plan for generating new projects moving forward.

FOSTERING COMMUNITY-WIDE GROUP COHESION

With the outline of the day made clear, the co-facilitators devoted between 35 to 50 minutes for a community-wide introduction process. Rarely did any single provider in the room know every other provider present. For many, this meeting was the first time meeting other members of their homeless service system. Each participant was invited to introduce themselves and share one hobby that they would like to turn into a wildly successful career. While this may at first appear to be an inefficient use of time, effective coordination of services demands strong, trusting relationships across agencies and interventions. This section provided an opportunity for individual frontline providers to begin to develop community-wide group cohesion. Indeed, as



participants introduced themselves and shared their hobbies, similarities in common interests began to emerge.

Next, participants were invited to pair off with someone they did not know well and, in four minutes, ask each other why they entered this work and what they love most about their job. After the time elapsed, the co-facilitators reconvened the group for a short debrief. Here, participants were invited to share what they had learned, prompted by discussion questions. Who is in the room is a Veteran? Who has been doing this work for five years? 10 years? 15 years? 20 years? Who came from another sector to do this work? This final icebreaker activity highlighted that, while attendees worked at many different organizations, there was a significant amount of overlap and a significant amount of skill and experience to draw from.

UNDERSTANDING THE CHALLENGE AHEAD

Following community-wide introductions, the co-facilitators provided context and foundational information on the origins of BFZ, the primary milestones for ending Veteran homelessness (Functional Zero¹ and the Criteria and Benchmarks for Achieving an Effective End to Veteran Homelessness²), how coordinated entry systems helped communities achieve the milestones, operational definitions clarifying what it meant to be a homeless Veteran for these purposes, and an acknowledgment of the work that was ahead once homelessness had been ended for Veterans. Regarding the primary milestones for ending Veteran homeless, the federal partners (VA, HUD, and USICH) notably viewed them, not at odds with each other, but as complementary. Functional Zero ensured that the number of Veterans experiencing homelessness is low while the Criteria and Benchmarks ensured that values and principles important to this work are upheld. Additionally, with both milestones, an end to homelessness did not mean that no one would ever experience a housing crisis again. Instead, an end to homelessness meant that every community would have a systematic response in place that ensured homelessness was prevented whenever possible or was otherwise a rare, brief, and non-recurring experience.

¹ Community Solutions: Key Definitions, Functional Zero – Veterans: <https://community.solutions/key-definitions/>

² Criteria and Benchmarks for Achieving the Goal of Ending Veteran Homelessness, <https://www.usich.gov/tools-for-action/criteria-for-ending-veteran-homelessness/>



COMMUNITY PROGRESS, GOALS, AND HIGH-LEVERAGE OPPORTUNITIES

The co-facilitators next reviewed the community's progress to date and identified high-leverage opportunities for improvement. Whereas the content thus far was broad and nationally applicable, this section was specific to local priorities with the local data available. Communities with quality by-name list (BNL) data were able to present information such as the change in the number Veterans actively experiencing homelessness over time, the monthly ratio of Veterans entering the system (inflow) compared to the number of Veterans exiting the system (outflow), or the average length of time Veterans spent in different housing process steps such as assessment to program enrollment or unit selection to move-in. When this information was not available, communities presented general outcome information or process flow diagrams for streamlining.

Prior to breaking for lunch, the co-facilitators left the group with helpful concepts to prepare them for the afternoon project planning. The first was a reflection on the importance of understanding the rules and rulesets that provide the framework on how homeless services operate. As it could be difficult for many organizations to develop and consistently deploy comprehensive orientation and onboarding processes, many frontline providers came to learn their job duties through a sort of oral tradition – norms communicated through shadowing or watercooler conversation as opposed to a comprehensive review of program directives, policies, and grant terms. Further, for programs like HUD-VASH, the full set of operating requirements were spread across VA documents, policies found in the Federal Register, HUD Question and Answer documents, local Public Housing Authority (PHA) administrative plans, and others. While it would be impractical for every service provider to be an expert in every rule for every program, it was important that communities have at least some members who were experts in understanding the various rules their programs operated from and how they interacted with each other. Not only would this prevent improvement projects from violating key policy restrictions, but it also allowed for other projects to be realized instead of prematurely quashed because someone believed it violated a policy that did not actually exist.

Participants were then invited to adopt three key mindsets for change: having a growth mindset, failing forward, and adopting a bias towards action. On growth mindset, the facilitators acknowledged fundamental shifts in how people approached challenges if they added the word “yet” to the end of a statement. “I can’t speak Spanish,” felt different to say and hear than, “I can’t speak Spanish... yet.” The purpose is to show that simply because something is not currently being done does not mean that it cannot possibly be done. Failing forward emphasized the importance of persevering through failed ideas, continuing to iterate and improve as ideas may take many adjustments before they achieve the desired impact. Last, adopting a bias toward action helped keep project ideas actionable and timely by asking, “what is something that we can try out next Tuesday”. This frame pushed participants to shrink change ideas small enough that they could be tested straightforwardly and quickly.



As the attendees paused for lunch, agency executive directors, program supervisors, and other leads were asked to leave to create a safe space so that participants could freely share their ideas. These ideas, rooted in the day-to-day lived experience of the frontline providers, were critical to capture as this was the meeting's purpose. Regional and national leaders in attendance were encouraged to stay and continue serving as SMEs throughout the afternoon.

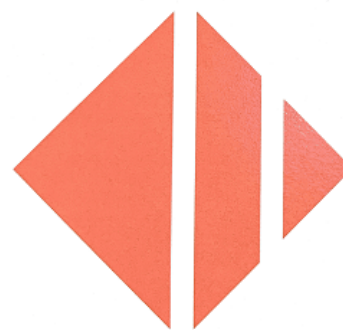
The afternoon resumed with an energizing activity. Although any activity that encouraged physical movement would be sufficient, traditionally the facilitators conducted a Rock-Paper-Scissors (RPS) tournament. Participants paired off to play a "best two out of three" game of RPS. Whomever lost the game became the winner's cheering party. The winner was then paired with a new competitor, who had their own cheering party. This cycle continued, with winners moving from competitor to competitor, gaining members for their cheering party, until there were only two competitors remaining and an entire room of cheering participants.

IDEA GENERATION, NARROWING AND SELECTING IDEAS, AND PROJECT SCOPING

Using the tips from the rulesets and mindsets section, along with the areas of focus identified in the community progress section, the facilitators outlined the goals of the remainder of the day: generating two to three actionable improvement projects that could begin work the following week. The structure of the afternoon followed the Stages of a Discussion Model³: open, narrow, and close. During the open stage, participants were given five to ten minutes to independently write their improvement ideas on sticky notes. This quiet time was particularly helpful for introverted participants to have an opportunity to get their ideas out on paper. Next, participants broke out into two groups, each run by one of the co-facilitators, to verbally share their ideas. As the ideas were spoken aloud, a group's co-facilitator processed, summarized, and repeated back the idea to the participant before

Stages of a Discussion

In order to reach understanding and agreement, groups gather and clarify information, narrow options, and select the best approach.



OPENING TOOLS

To generate and clarify information and ideas

NARROWING TOOLS

To organize and/or evaluate the information

CLOSING TOOLS

To reconcile differences and reach agreement

FIGURE 1: ESSENTIAL FACILITATION'S STAGES OF A DISCUSSION MODEL

³ Essential Facilitation: Core Skills for Guiding Groups. Interaction Associates, Inc.



asking a scribe, or note taker, to record the idea on a large sheet of flip-chart paper. To help visually distinguish ideas, it was recommended that the scribe write each idea in alternating colors, using large point markers, leaving room on the left hand side of the idea for lettering, and spacing each idea vertically by approximately one half-inch to one inch apart. This process continued until all ideas were shared by participants. To ensure that introverted participants were given an opportunity to share their ideas out loud, it was also recommended that, before concluding this section, the co-facilitator checked-in with every participant in the group and asked if they either A) had any remaining ideas to share, or B) were finished with the exercise. It should be noted that, at this stage, participants naturally felt inclined to debate the merits of each idea as they were shared, it was strongly advised that these inclinations be redirected or saved for the narrowing stage that followed.

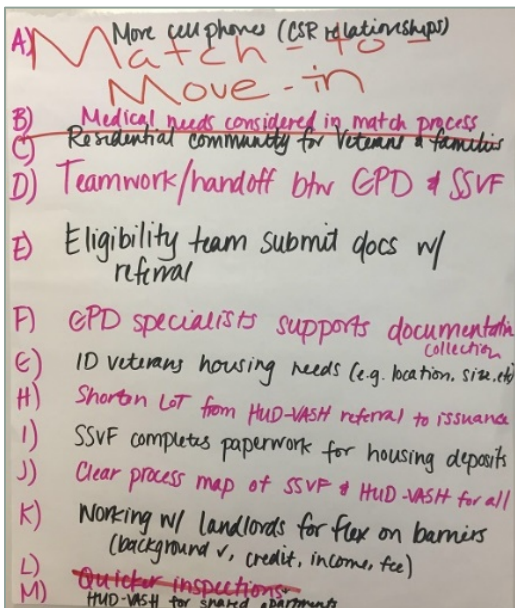


FIGURE 2: EXAMPLE OF IDEA BANK

Once a robust bank of ideas was generated, the co-facilitators reconvened the entire group for the narrowing stage: combining the lists and reviewing, clarifying, and de-duplicating ideas. Each idea was spoken back to the participants so that everyone was aware of what is being proposed. This process was important in that some ideas used jargon or context specific language that other participants might not have been aware of. Additionally, some ideas may have been deceptively similar at first glance, suggesting that they be de-duplicated, but actually had critical distinctions that warranted consideration as separate ideas. Then, participants were given the opportunity to “vote” for their favorite ideas. Each participant was given a set of adhesive dots representing the number of votes they were allotted using the N/3 format whereby the number of votes

equaled the number of ideas generated, divided by three. In instances where there were a significant number of ideas generated, it was recommended to cap the votes allotted to each participant at seven. Notably, projects would not be selected from the ideas that received the most votes. Instead, the votes were a means to identify and assess the intensity of interest in various ideas.

Once everyone voted, the votes were tallied and announced to everyone. It was at this moment that participants were invited to advocate, on behalf or in opposition, for any of the ideas available. This advocacy period allowed for a variety of discussions. Participants could highlight ideas that received a significant number of votes as possible projects to implement, highlight ideas that received few if any votes that they felt were worth implementing, or even vehemently oppose ideas that received many votes but should not be implemented. This was often contentious, and the co-facilitators needed to balance keeping the process

moving along with allowing voices to be heard with respect and civility. As there may have been times where ideas that are inconsistent with existing policies or are problematic in a variety of ways, this was also an opportunity for SMEs to clarify which ideas were “in-bounds”.

The advocacy phase often blended into the third and final stage: closing. Participants proposed and unanimously consented to two to three projects for “scoping” and implementation. Scoping a project involved refining an idea into something imminently actionable, identifying project team leads and members, identifying measures or indicators that can be used to determine if the project is successful, outlining first steps and initial target dates, and a feedback loop so that the community as a whole could stay informed on the projects’ progress. Only project ideas that had unanimous consent, as defined by everyone in the room being able to “live with it”, were selected for scoping. Interestingly, scoped projects did not have to be individual ideas and the final versions often combined multiple ideas.

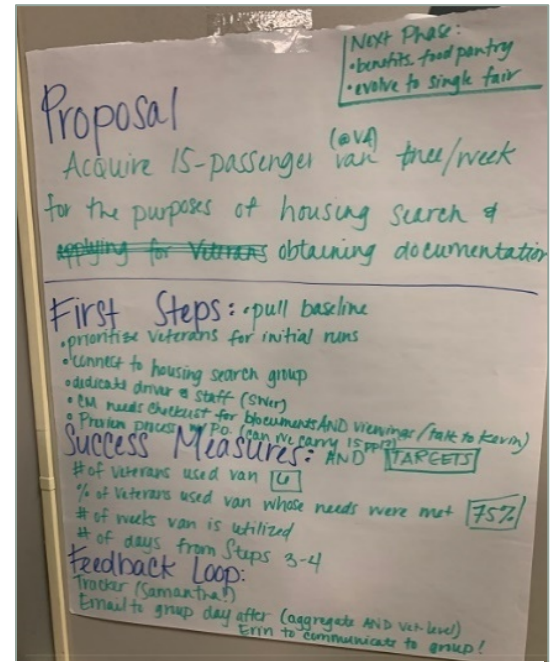


FIGURE 3: EXAMPLE SCOPED PROJECT

In order to end on a positive note, the final moments were spent inviting the participants to recognize, highlight, or otherwise appreciate members present that day – either for the way they contributed during the meeting or for other contributions in their day-to-day jobs. Once the meeting is adjourned, digital photographs of the idea lists, scoped projects, and any other documented items were taken for later transcription and a member of the community’s leadership team was tasked with storing the transcribed ideas and scheduling follow-up meetings to generate future projects.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR DISCUSSION

The co-facilitators noted that the meeting’s structure and intent touched on concepts found in Tuckman’s (1965) Model of Group Development⁴. This model features five discrete stages: forming – coming together as a team and beginning to learn who the other group members are; storming – a period of natural conflict as

⁴ Tuckman, Bruce W. (1965). Developmental Sequence in Small Groups. Psychological Bulletin 63.6 (1965): 384-399. Web.



members establish themselves in relation to other members; norming – the development of consensus and the formation of a group culture; performing – shifting focus to accomplishing the activities the group is tasked to do; and adjourning – concluding the work and disbanding. High performing teams go through these stages as part of their growth and journey to become high performing teams. Those familiar with this model acknowledge that the storming stage is often the most critical as members uncomfortable with conflict may try to minimize or avoid strife. Consequently, successfully moving past the storming stage and on to the norming stage depends on constructively confronting and working through conflict. This conflict cannot be avoided.

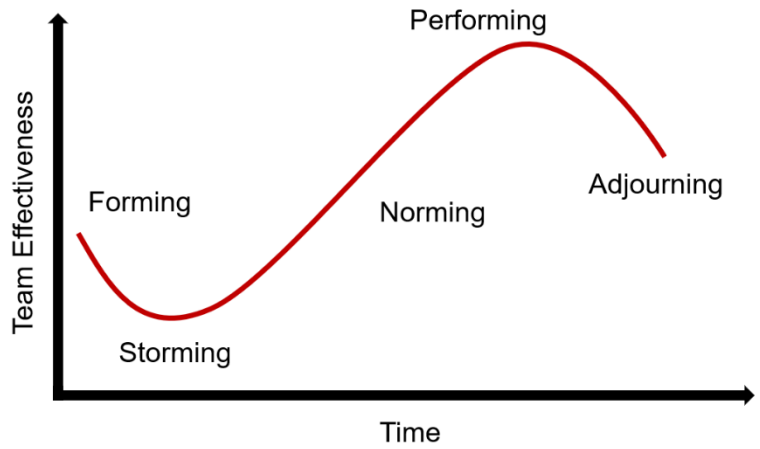


FIGURE 4: TUCKMAN'S MODEL OF GROUP DEVELOPMENT

In regard to the Frontline Onsite Meeting format, the co-facilitators speculated that, while the narrative arc of the day took participants through all five stages of group development, more importantly, the day may have helped shepherd the community as a whole through the storming stage so that work could continue on through the norming and performing stages on towards their goal of ending Veteran homelessness.