

# Homeless Veterans in New York State

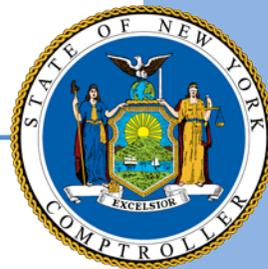
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Local Partnerships Making Real Progress

OFFICE OF THE NEW YORK STATE COMPTROLLER

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Thomas P. DiNapoli, State Comptroller



November 2017

# Message from the Comptroller

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November 2017

Homelessness is a troubling, chronic problem nationally and in New York State. Veterans of U.S. military service have made up a disproportionate share of our nation's homeless population. These men and women answered the call to serve in our nation's military, and they have earned our gratitude and our unwavering support in their time of need. This report examines the challenge of veteran homelessness, including evidence of progress in New York, and information about how local communities are working to respond effectively.

In 2010, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development and the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs reported on the nature and extent of veteran homelessness nationwide. The agencies found that veterans, who constituted 9.5 percent of the U.S. population, accounted for 16 percent of the nation's homeless. In addition, 50 percent of homeless veterans lived in California, New York, Florida and Texas, much higher than those states' 28 percent share of veterans overall. To address this difficult issue, several federal programs and initiatives, including the Mayors Challenge to End Veteran Homelessness, were created.

Since December 2015, eight New York communities – Albany, Buffalo/Western New York, Long Island, Rochester, Saratoga Springs, Schenectady, Syracuse and Troy – have been recognized for answering the Mayors Challenge by ensuring that all homeless veterans in their jurisdictions have quick access to housing services. From 2011 to 2016, while New York State's total homeless population grew by 36 percent, the number of homeless veterans in the State dropped by 78 percent – the most dramatic decline in any state. Although many factors have contributed to the decrease, local efforts and teamwork among organizations at all levels – including federal, State and local government agencies, community nonprofit organizations, faith-based institutions and veterans groups – appear to have made a significant difference and I commend them for their dedication.

Despite the progress made to date, challenges persist. Among other issues, there is uncertainty regarding federal funding for certain programs that assist homeless veterans and their families. Continued attention to housing and other issues confronting veterans remains critically important at the federal, State and local levels. The respect, admiration and gratitude we feel for veterans of the U.S. military should inspire actions that make a difference in their lives. When military service is complete, we must not only welcome our veterans back, but work to ensure that every one has a safe, comfortable dwelling to call home.

# I. Veteran Homelessness in New York

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In 2010, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) issued a report to Congress on the nature and extent of veteran homelessness as part of a broader initiative to address homelessness overall.<sup>1</sup> The report noted that veterans of U.S. military service were overrepresented among the homeless population, accounting for about 9.5 percent of the total adult population over the age of 18, but 16 percent of homeless adults at the time of the 2010 point-in-time count.<sup>2</sup>

According to the U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness (USICH), veterans experience homelessness for some of the same economic reasons as do civilians, such as a lack of affordable housing, low wages and long-term unemployment. However, as a result of exposure to combat and repeated deployments, homeless veterans may also experience post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), traumatic brain injury (TBI), and other traumas that can increase the risk of homelessness. Additionally, homeless veterans are far more likely than other homeless subpopulations to become chronically homeless.<sup>3</sup>

While veteran homelessness exists across the country, the distribution among states has been uneven. According to the 2010 report to Congress, four states – California, New York, Florida, and Texas – accounted for 50 percent of the nation’s homeless veterans. At the time, these same states accounted for 46 percent of the total homeless population, but only 32 percent of the total U.S. population, and 28 percent of all veterans.<sup>4</sup> Similar to the national trend, there tend to be “pockets” of homeless veterans located around New York. New York City has the highest number, while communities located in the Long Island, Mid-Hudson Valley, Capital District, Central, Finger Lakes, and Western regions also experienced higher numbers of homeless veterans than other regions of the State.

As shown in Figure 1, while New York’s homeless population grew from 63,445 to 86,352 individuals from 2011 to 2016, the number of homeless veterans in the State dropped dramatically, from 5,765 to 1,248, a decline of 78.4 percent.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, Office of Community Planning Development, U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, Nation Center on Homelessness Among Veterans. *Veteran Homelessness: A Supplemental Report to the 2010 Annual Homeless Assessment Report to Congress*, available at <http://www.va.gov/HOMELESS/docs/2010AHARVeteransReport.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> Point-in-time figures are based on counts of homeless persons on a single night in January by local or regional entities known as Continuums of Care (CoCs) based on standards and guidance from HUD. HUD cautions that it does not independently verify all information submitted by CoCs, and the reliability and consistency of homeless counts may also vary among CoCs and over reporting periods. See “CoC Homeless Populations and Subpopulations Reports” at <https://www.hudexchange.info/programs/coc/coc-homeless-populations-and-subpopulations-reports/>.

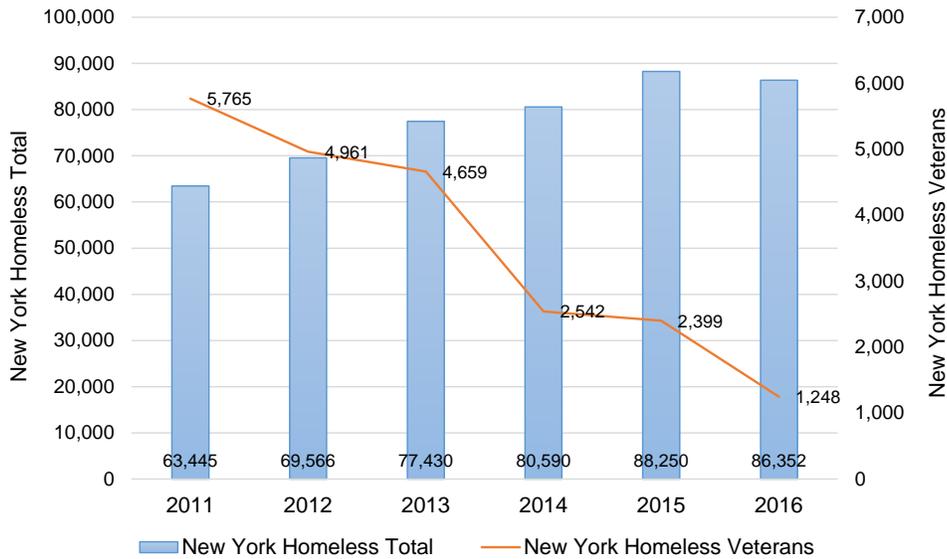
<sup>3</sup> U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, Office of Policy Development and Research. *Evidence Matters, Summer 2012*, available at <https://www.huduser.gov/portal/periodicals/em/summer12/highlight1.html>.

<sup>4</sup> *Veteran Homelessness: A Supplemental Report to the 2010 Annual Homeless Assessment Report to Congress*.

<sup>5</sup> U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. 2007 – 2016 PIT Counts by State, available at <https://www.hudexchange.info/resource/3031/pit-and-hic-data-since-2007/>.

**Figure 1**

**New York State’s Homeless and Homeless Veterans Populations, 2011 to 2016**

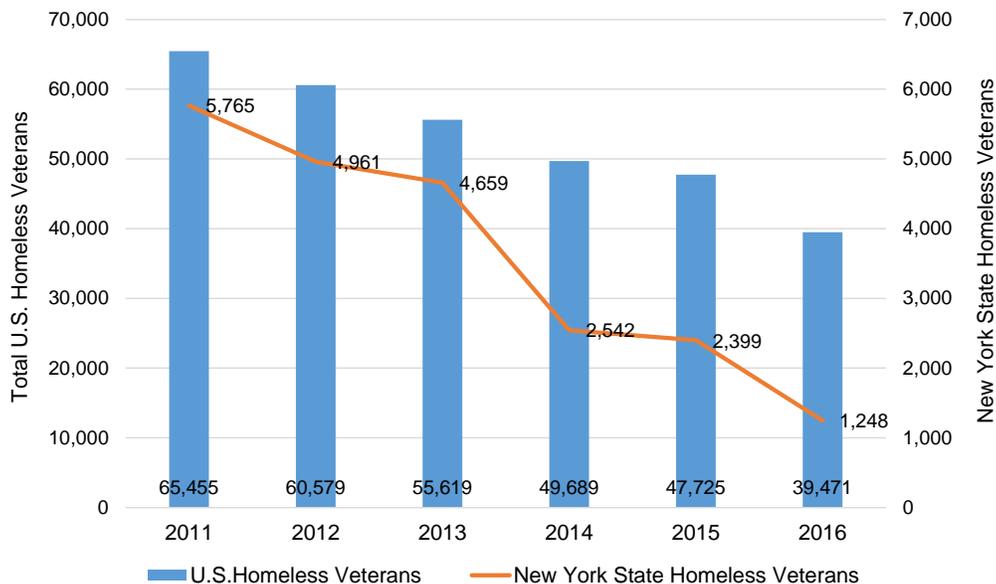


Source: U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. 2007 – 2016 PIT Counts by State. Available at <https://www.hudexchange.info/resource/3031/pit-and-hic-data-since-2007/>.

Nationally, during the same time period, the number of homeless veterans dropped from 65,455 to 39,471, or by 39.7 percent. As shown in Figure 2, the nationwide count of homeless veterans dropped noticeably, but not as sharply as the number in New York.

**Figure 2**

**New York’s Homeless Veterans Population Compared to U.S., 2011 to 2016**



Source: U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. 2007 – 2016 PIT Counts by State. Available at <https://www.hudexchange.info/resource/3031/pit-and-hic-data-since-2007/>.

## II. Local Efforts to Reduce Veteran Homelessness

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Many local communities have worked to reduce veteran homelessness. These communities have used resources including federal, State and local funding to identify and/or develop programs to meet the needs of the veterans they serve.

As part of the 2010 *Federal Strategic Plan to Prevent and End Homelessness*, HUD and the VA, along with other federal agencies and the homeless assistance community (including public and private sectors), committed to preventing and ending veteran homelessness by 2015.<sup>6</sup> As defined by the federal initiative, while ending veteran homelessness is primarily about the community's capacity to connect veterans to permanent housing, the community also has the capacity to immediately offer some form of shelter (i.e., emergency shelter, bridge or transitional housing, other temporary settings) to any veteran experiencing unsheltered homelessness in the community who wants it, while assisting him or her to swiftly achieve permanent housing.<sup>7</sup> An overarching goal is that communities will have the capacity to quickly connect veterans who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless to help.

A number of federal programs were expanded or created to identify and connect homeless veterans with housing and supportive services, including health care, substance abuse treatment, and employment services. These services are intended to enable veterans to maintain higher levels of housing stability and self-sufficiency. As outlined by HUD, VA and other agencies, federal programs and initiatives include the HUD-VA Supportive Housing (HUD-VASH) program, the Supportive Services for Veteran Families (SSVF) program, the Veterans Justice Outreach program, the Homeless Veterans' Reintegration program, and the Mayors Challenge to End Veteran Homelessness.

According to HUD, the Mayors Challenge was a way to solidify partnerships and secure commitments from mayors across the country to end veteran homelessness.<sup>8</sup> Leaders from HUD, the VA, USICH, and the National League of Cities called for mayors to make a commitment to reaching "Functional Zero." This term refers to the existence of "a well-coordinated and efficient community system that assures homelessness is *rare, brief and non-recurring* and *no veteran is forced to live on the street*," according to the VA. It is further defined as having a system of services, resources and housing in place to respond quickly and effectively to prevent and end homelessness among veterans.<sup>9</sup>

Across New York State, more than two dozen mayors, town supervisors and county executives have participated in the Mayor's Challenge. Since December 2015, eight communities – Albany, Buffalo/Western New York, Rochester, Saratoga Springs, Schenectady, Syracuse, Troy and Long Island – were recognized by federal agencies for meeting the Mayors Challenge by ensuring that all homeless veterans have quick access

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<sup>6</sup> U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness, U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development and U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. *Mayors Challenge to End Veteran Homelessness in 2015*. Available at <http://bit.ly/mayorschallenge>.

<sup>7</sup> U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness. *Achieving the Goal of Ending Veteran Homelessness. Criteria and Benchmarks*. Version 3, October 1, 2015.

<sup>8</sup> See <https://www.usich.gov/solutions/collaborative-leadership/mayors-challenge>.

<sup>9</sup> U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. *Ending Homelessness Among Veterans Overview*. See [http://www.va.gov/HOMELESS/ssvf/docs/Ending\\_Veterans\\_Homelessness\\_Overview.pdf](http://www.va.gov/HOMELESS/ssvf/docs/Ending_Veterans_Homelessness_Overview.pdf).

to housing services. As of October 11, 2017, 51 communities and 3 states had met the Mayors Challenge nationally.<sup>10</sup>

HUD, the VA, and the USICH developed specific criteria and benchmarks to help Mayors Challenge participants to achieve their goals, with a focus on long-term, lasting solutions. These included the Federal Criteria and Benchmarks Review Tool and the Master List Template and Benchmark Generation Tool. The aforementioned eight communities provided OSC with the criteria and benchmarks they submitted as Mayors Challenge participants. The federal agencies developed specifications to confirm that the communities' goal of ending veteran homelessness was achieved. (See Appendix A for a synopsis of this information.) USICH provides information on best practices from cities and communities around the nation participating in the Mayors Challenge on its website.<sup>11</sup>

Other efforts in the State have also reported promising results. Based on information provided to OSC by representatives of the New York City Continuum of Care, community partners have leveraged relationships and enhanced systems already in place to serve the City's homeless veteran population. From 2011 through 2016, the homeless veteran population in New York City decreased from 4,677 to 559, according to HUD. Although still striving to meet all the benchmarks of the Mayors Challenge, the City was recognized by VA's 25 Cities Initiative in February of 2017 for effectively ending chronic homelessness among veterans.<sup>12</sup> Some of New York City's other outreach and engagement strategies are outlined in Appendix A.

Several county comptrollers from across the State have also provided OSC with information about the programs they have implemented and the progress that has been made in assisting homeless veterans and their families. This includes Albany County, which coordinates with the Albany Stratton VA Medical Center to offer an array of programs to assist veterans in maintaining housing and stability in the community. Dutchess County reported using a multidisciplinary approach to identify veterans in need, connecting them to housing, health care, mental health services, and related supportive services. Agencies in Onondaga County have partnered to form a task force group specific to ending veteran homelessness. Ulster County created the "Patriots Project," which involved acquiring and renovating a historic, 19th-century home located in a residential section of Kingston's Rondout District. Additional information about these efforts is noted in Appendix A.

Counties and cities across the State rely on a mix of local, State, and federal dollars to support their programs. Appendix B summarizes the efforts and challenges they have described and experienced. Due to uncertainty surrounding the availability of certain federal funding, despite the reported success and progress made in assisting homeless veterans and their families, some of these programs may be in jeopardy. Organizations that provide direct service to homeless veterans and their families are reportedly receiving notification from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs that they may imminently lose funding.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> <https://www.usich.gov/solutions/collaborative-leadership/mayors-challenge>.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> In March 2014, the VA launched the 25 Cities Initiative to assist communities with high concentrations of homeless veterans to integrate existing programs in their local efforts to end veteran homelessness. <http://www.va.gov/HOMELESS25cities.asp>.

<sup>13</sup> See <http://www.poughkeepsiejournal.com/story/news/local/2017/09/14/udson-river-housing-loses-funding-homeless-veteran/666909001/> and <http://spectrumlocalnews.com/nys/rochester/news/2017/09/28/federal-funding-cuts-rochester-veteran-outreach-center>.

## III. Conclusion

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In February 2016, the Comptroller's Office released an audit of the Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance (OTDA) Oversight of Homeless Shelters (Report 2015-S-23), undertaken to determine whether OTDA adequately oversees homeless shelters to ensure they are operating in compliance with applicable laws, rules, and regulations. In June 2016, the Office of the State Comptroller released a report on *Homeless Shelters and Homelessness in New York State* (Report 2016-D-3) about conditions found in homeless shelters outside of New York City, and presented demographic data for ten regions with large populations of homeless people. This current report provides additional information and analysis on key issues specifically associated with homeless veterans in the State.

The Mayors Challenge communities have demonstrated that they have the resources, plans, and system capacity in place should any veteran become homeless or be at risk of homelessness in the future. The communities' efforts to fulfill the Mayors Challenge have led them to encourage the transformation of ad hoc relationships into ongoing collaborations; to promote regular meetings and improve communications within local work groups; and to identify additional needs, potential partners, and ways the work groups can collaborate more effectively.

While taking note of progress in addressing homelessness among veterans, the VA recently concluded: "These gains aside, there is more work to do to address the many causes of homelessness among Veterans. These include poverty, lack of access to reasonably priced housing, isolation from family or friends and substance use or mental health challenges that may develop or worsen as a result of service-related trauma or housing instability."<sup>14</sup>

The lack of final action to date on the overall federal budget for FFY 2018 leaves uncertainty regarding future federal funding for a variety of programs and organizations that assist homeless veterans and their families. Recent reports of imminent funding cuts to some of these programs heighten this concern. At the federal, State and local levels, continuing attention to housing and other challenges facing veterans remains critically important. It is incumbent upon officials at all levels of government to do their part for those who have served this nation by ensuring their essential needs are met. At a minimum, this should include a place to call home.

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<sup>14</sup> See [https://www.va.gov/HOMELESS/about\\_the\\_initiative.asp](https://www.va.gov/HOMELESS/about_the_initiative.asp).

# Appendices

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## Appendix A -- Community Activities to Address Veteran Homelessness

**A. Mayors Challenge Communities.** Representatives from the eight Mayors Challenge communities provided the Office of the State Comptroller with the written criteria and benchmarks they submitted as participants in the Mayors Challenge, some of which are highlighted below. These summaries are intended to convey certain distinctive features of the campaigns to prevent veteran homelessness, not to describe fully the complex and sustained efforts undertaken. This information has not been independently verified by the Office of the State Comptroller.

### 1. City of Albany

In November 2014 and again in February 2015, a coordinated week-long outreach was conducted with community volunteers to identify and track homeless veterans in the City of Albany. Outreach workers identified a total of 34 veterans. By spring of 2015, the City reported to the federal agencies that all identified homeless veterans had been provided housing and treatment resources.

Albany's homeless veterans count is heavily influenced by the presence of the Albany Stratton VA Medical Center. Veterans are often treated for substance abuse and mental health illness at VA facilities in Western New York and, upon completion of a treatment program, come to Albany to continue their recovery. Many arrive homeless and are directed by VA staff to the City's transitional and permanent housing programs. These programs include employment, legal, and benefits assistance, and peer support. The goal is to ensure that veterans are immediately linked to the VA's Homeless Program and housed, so that any episodes of homelessness are brief, rare, and non-recurring.

### 2. City of Buffalo and Western New York

The Western New York (WNY) Continuum of Care (CoC) reported 97 veterans in shelter and 9 veterans unsheltered on the night of the January 26, 2016 PIT count. The WNY CoC covers Erie, Niagara, Genesee, Wyoming and Orleans counties including the cities of Buffalo, Niagara Falls, Tonawanda and Lockport. The CoC took the lead and established a community working group that included CoC and veteran service providers. The Work Group received the confirmation of reaching "Functional Zero" from federal agencies on September 1, 2016.

The WNY Work Group leveraged an established outreach and communication network with homeless service providers. For example, VA Medical Center outreach staff regularly communicate with street outreach teams and emergency shelters. Street outreach teams play a critical role by verifying the military status and program eligibility of veterans, so that they can be referred to proper resources.

### **3. Region of Long Island**

The Long Island Region reported 71 veterans in homeless shelters and 70 veterans in transitional housing on the night of the January 27, 2016 PIT count. Community participants in the Mayors Challenge formed the Long Island Veteran Working Group, meeting biweekly so that they could focus on each veteran's case individually.

Work groups conducted coordinated street outreach at least twice a week, always including a veteran as part of the outreach team. Outreach groups partnered with the Metropolitan Transportation Authority, local police departments, local Departments of Social Services (DSS), medical doctors and other volunteers. The work groups focused on organizational outreach, providing resource material to libraries, churches, businesses and community members, communicating through mainstream and social media. Town vehicles bore bumper stickers with a hotline number to call if anyone had seen a homeless veteran.

Suffolk County passed legislation known as the "Housing Our Homeless Heroes Act." Part of the Act allows County properties to be turned over to nonprofits to be rehabilitated and then used for homeless veteran families. As reported to OSC, nine homes had been turned over to nonprofits, with the expectation of more in the future.

### **4. City of Rochester**

The City of Rochester's 2015 PIT count identified 55 homeless veterans. Rochester's community partners work collaboratively to address homelessness and to identify veterans in need of housing and other assistance. Rochester established the new Community Homeless Outreach Program dedicated to street outreach.

Veterans can walk into any of three locations in the Rochester area and be connected with the homeless point of contact and referred to the VA. If a veteran is identified as homeless at a local shelter, employees reach out to the VA point of contact to link the veteran to resources. Veterans are offered housing assistance and connections to medical and psychological care as needed. The Veterans Outreach Center provides temporary financial assistance and supportive services to at-risk veterans most in need of assistance to avoid homelessness.

### **5. City of Saratoga Springs**

The City of Saratoga Springs set up a network of community partners to meet the Mayors Challenge. After two weeks of dedicated outreach, 18 veterans were identified as homeless in Saratoga Springs. By coordinating services and pooling the resources of all Task Force members, all homeless veterans were housed within 60 days.

Community partners provided street outreach, visiting sites known to be frequented by the homeless to identify homeless veterans. The County DSS was contacted and asked to report any veterans coming in for housing assistance. The Mayor's Office set up office time at City Hall with a case manager from the not-for-profit Veterans and Community Housing Coalition so that any veteran could walk in and receive assistance.

## **6. City of Schenectady**

The City of Schenectady's 2015 PIT count, performed in November 2014, identified 12 homeless veterans, nine of whom were willing to be served. In March 2015, Schenectady achieved its goal of finding permanent housing solutions for the nine veterans. (Schenectady established a plan to check periodically on the three individuals who chose not to engage in case they change their minds.) Schenectady's Department of Development acted as the lead entity, along with Bethesda House, the primary homelessness services provider in Schenectady, and other partner organizations.

The Coordinated Entry system was established through the Schenectady CoC. When a veteran presents as homeless, an intake is done to assess his or her needs and a service plan is put in place. The service plan addresses not just the housing needs of the veteran, but also mental health and medical issues. The veteran meets daily with the housing case manager and/or the social worker to report on progress and any hurdles with the service plan. The process can take as little as one or two days, but for veterans requiring financial assistance the process can take up to two weeks due to eligibility requirements.

Schenectady's new Veterans Resource Center, led by a veteran, helps veterans connect with veteran programs throughout the community. A veteran volunteer engages with veterans and helps direct any who are homeless to Bethesda House.

## **7. City of Syracuse and Onondaga County**

On November 6, 2015, the City of Syracuse was confirmed by HUD as having effectively ended homelessness among veterans. At the time, there were 18 veterans in homeless shelters and 20 veterans in transitional housing programs. There were four individuals who had been offered a permanent housing opportunity, but had not accepted. (Outreach staff continue to work with unsheltered veterans who have refused housing options in efforts to link them to care.) Representatives from government and private support agencies created the Veteran's Workgroup, which took on the task of creating policies, benchmarks, and strong community partnerships to end veteran homelessness in the community.

The Workgroup includes local community partners, such as the psychiatric center, Department of Mental Health representatives, substance abuse treatment center representatives, security officers, and the Syracuse police. Street outreach to individuals is provided by the Workgroup using a "trio model" that includes an outreach worker, a psychiatrist, and a nurse practitioner. Shelter and housing are offered immediately and engagement efforts continue at least twice a week (frequently daily) to assist veterans in accessing services they need or request.

## **8. City of Troy**

The co-leaders for the Troy Mayors Challenge are the City of Troy's Department of Housing and Community Development and Joseph's House and Shelter, Inc., a local nonprofit homeless services agency. As of September 1, 2016, a total of 45 veterans

had been identified as homeless in Troy. Ten of the 45 homeless veteran families served meet the HUD definition of Chronic Homelessness. All 45 of the homeless veteran families accepted either emergency homeless shelter or transitional housing services.

Troy and Rensselaer County adopted the “No Wrong Door” entry approach into homeless and housing services, enlisting all social service providers throughout Troy and surrounding County municipalities to identify homeless veterans. The providers include municipal police and fire departments, nonprofit shelter and outreach programs, the county’s DSS, nonprofit and government veteran services programs, soup kitchens and food pantries, schools and colleges, public housing authorities, public library branches, and city staff.

**B. New York City.** New York City is participating in the Mayors Challenge and continues efforts to reach “Functional Zero.” In New York City, community partners have been able to leverage relationships and enhance systems already in place to serve the City’s homeless veteran population. From 2011 through 2016, the population of homeless veterans in New York City decreased from 4,677 to 559 according to the HUD PIT counts. New York City and its partners have employed several strategies related to outreach and engagement:

- Conducted a data match with the VA National Center on Homelessness among veterans to confirm baseline data early into the VA’s 25 Cities Initiative.<sup>15</sup>
- Developed a by-name list of homeless veterans, applying a web-based application to capture critical data, track movement across the system, improve placements and increase accountability.
- Developed new, locally funded rental subsidies to meet the needs of homeless veterans whose primary barrier to housing is economic. These subsidies are specifically for disabled veterans, low- and fixed-income veterans and underemployed veterans and their families.
- Developed incentives for landlords and brokers to house homeless veterans, such as bonuses by subsidy type.
- Instituted a peer-to-peer model of veteran engagement and direct housing assistance to help veterans overcome emotional ambivalence to housing placement. Veteran peers are generally formerly homeless veterans.
- Developed and implemented a housing supply plan with committed units specifically for homeless veterans and prioritized veterans for all housing placements.
- Increased accountability for all stakeholders through regular meetings and interagency data and information sharing.

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<sup>15</sup> In March 2014, the VA launched the 25 Cities Initiative to assist communities with high concentrations of homeless veterans to integrate existing programs in their local efforts to end veteran homelessness. See <https://www.va.gov/HOMELESS/25cities.asp>.

**C. New York State Counties.** The following County Comptrollers provided the Office of the State Comptroller with details about their veteran programs. This information has not been independently verified by the Office of the State Comptroller.

### **1. Albany County**

The Annual Capital Region Stand-Down is just one of the many efforts to provide services to homeless veterans. Stand-Downs are typically one- to three-day events providing homeless veterans with services such as food, shelter, clothing, health screenings, and VA and Social Security benefits counseling. Referrals to a variety of other necessary services, such as housing, employment, and substance abuse treatment, are also provided. Stand-Downs are collaborative events, coordinated between local VAs, other government agencies, and community agencies that serve the homeless.

Stand-Downs in the military are traditionally associated with a break in combat, when troops are brought in to a safe haven for a period of rest, hot meals, and a chance to be free from the rigors of war. This same principle also applies to homeless veterans in the area who need to be free from the rigors of the street.

The Albany Stratton VA Medical Center offers an array of programs to assist veterans in maintaining housing and stability in the community. In addition, the former Ann Lee Nursing Home, adjacent to the Albany International Airport, is in the predevelopment phase for a 220-unit permanent housing development for formerly homeless veterans. This project includes both renovation and new construction, and will serve as limited-equity housing with support services available on site. The project is being funded by a mix of federal and State dollars, and with the help of private donations. The project's developer has set up similar programs in Massachusetts.

### **2. Dutchess County**

Dutchess County has a long-term commitment to ending homelessness through multi-disciplinary actions that identify veterans in need and connect them to housing, health care, mental health services, and related supportive services. The County's Division of Veteran's Services works collaboratively with the local VA Housing Coordinator at Castle Point, the various Dutchess County departments, a local homeless housing partner, and a local not-for-profit mental health provider, as well as numerous other support agencies to provide a full complement of services that address veteran homelessness. The number of clients serviced in the last grant year totaled 131 veteran families. Funding for programs include federal, State, and county dollars.

Identified solutions include the development of affordable housing for veterans by partnering with private developers to create "Liberty Station," which provides housing for individuals, and a women's veteran home located in Poughkeepsie. Combined, these projects created more than 50 units of housing designated for veterans. The "Hire-A-Vet" initiative is a collaboration with the Dutchess County Regional Chamber of Commerce, creating greater access to jobs for veterans. This initiative, along with additional outreach, has led to a greater than 90 percent success rate for participants

who are seeking employment, and has helped raise awareness of the need to hire veterans in the Dutchess County community.

Dutchess County has implemented the PFC Joseph P. Dwyer PTSD Peer-to-Peer Veteran Support Program. The program brings veterans together in a secure, anonymous setting in order to help one another cope with the effects of PTSD and TBI. The program provider hired two veterans, who will also participate on any veteran coalition or collaboration in Dutchess County.

### **3. Onondaga County**

Agencies in Onondaga County have partnered to form a task force group specific to ending veteran homelessness. One of the partners created a full-time Outreach Case Manager position, which is held by a veteran. Staff members from the Onondaga County Comptroller's Office, as well as the Rescue Mission Director of Emergency Services, have accompanied this case manager on outreach efforts in Syracuse.

Their observations have shed light on the ongoing challenges of housing chronically homeless veterans as well as many other homeless people. The need for street outreach is necessary to offer help to the men and women who have found themselves homeless for a variety of reasons. The Outreach Case Manager's relationship with the homeless community enables him to receive information on any homeless veterans who are new to the area, as well as to continue to build relationships.

### **4. Ulster County**

According to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, approximately 20 to 30 homeless veterans live in Ulster County. To address this, the "Patriots Project" was created by acquiring and renovating a home located in a residential section of Kingston's Rondout District. The property was a former assisted living center that was in a state of disrepair. As the result of a broad coalition of assistance, including private donors, local businesses, Ulster County Community College (SUNY Ulster), faith-based organizations, and other community groups, the structure was restored. This eight-bedroom, single-occupancy residence, complete with peer support and case management services, cooking and laundry facilities, common areas, and computer access, opened in 2014.

Forty-nine veterans have spent an average of 60 to 90 days in this transitional home since July 2014. The duration of stay for each occupant is situational, and largely based on the case work needed to address the root cause of the individual's homelessness and to place the veteran in more permanent housing.

The Patriots Project Veteran's Home also includes 24-hour on-site staffing. Funding for this service is provided directly through the VA. The majority of the veterans served by the Patriots Project are single males from the Vietnam War era. Although the homeless veteran community may never be fully eliminated due to practical limitations, the situation in Ulster County can best be described as having a population of "Functional Zero" – everyone who is receptive to assistance has received help.

## **Appendix B -- Efforts Taken to Meet the Mayors Challenge**

This section summarizes some of the challenges faced in assisting homeless veterans and the efforts undertaken to meet individual veteran's needs, as reported to the Office of the State Comptroller by the counties and cities referenced in this report.

### **Challenges Faced**

Significant research has been dedicated to the causes and risk factors associated with veteran homelessness. Homeless veterans may experience multiple debilitating conditions, including mental illness, chronic illness, physical disabilities and associated pain from injuries, and substance abuse. These conditions may challenge their ability to find employment and build stable relationships. As a result, like other homeless individuals, those who are veterans do not always have access to health care, and may not have the support of family and friends.<sup>16</sup>

Assisting homeless veterans to find suitable, permanent housing, along with the support services necessary to help them remain self-sufficient, presents many challenges to the communities and individuals trying to serve them. In sharing their strategies to end veteran homelessness, the communities also described key challenges they faced in serving this population, including that some individuals do not welcome assistance.

Homeless veterans can be difficult to locate. Many live out in the open, in an unstructured environment. A number of the communities reported finding unsheltered veterans living in deeply wooded areas, in cars, and in abandoned buildings. Some of these locations, such as abandoned buildings, posed physical dangers for street outreach staff and volunteers.

Some communities faced obstacles in obtaining move-in resources for homeless veterans once suitable permanent housing had been found. Sometimes veterans are delayed moving into their new homes because they lack funds to pay for security deposits, utilities, and basic household items.

Furthermore, not every individual who served in the military is eligible for VA health care services or has access to VA housing and services programs. Some individuals with military service records do not qualify for HUD-VASH due to their discharge status or other factors. As a result, the communities needed to provide other housing and service opportunities using alternative resources. Additionally, eligibility for some federal programs and funding is based on the size of a city. Smaller cities are not always eligible to apply for some of the programs and funding available to larger cities.

### **Meeting Individual Needs**

Local organizations that work to address the needs of homeless veterans emphasized the importance of every homeless veteran receiving services specifically tailored to their individual needs. Given the complexity of homelessness, officials at these organizations found that a one-on-one or person-centered approach is essential to reaching veterans living on the street. This approach can be successful in gaining the trust of some of the most difficult-to-serve homeless veterans. Outreach and case workers presented

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<sup>16</sup> Ainslie, Noelle (2016). *Homeless Veterans: United States*. Cinahl Information Systems, Glendale, CA.

homeless veterans with several permanent housing solutions suited to their needs, an approach they say is more likely to be successful because veterans can choose programs they are willing to enter.

In some cases, community organizations coordinated multiple, focused outreach activities in order to identify all veterans experiencing homelessness in the community. Outreach workers may include staff from organizations such as the local CoCs, Departments of Social Services, mayors' offices, police and fire departments, housing authorities, and addiction treatment programs, as well as veteran volunteers and others from the community. The community partners continue to collaborate on outreach efforts in order to identify any newly homeless veterans.

The communities established Coordinated Entry systems to facilitate intake efforts. They include "one-stop" locations that provide on-site coordination with housing assistance and other support services such as medical care and substance abuse services. For example, the City of Troy developed a graphic "Veterans Coordinated Entry" model, distributed throughout Rensselaer County, which contains program and contact information for homeless veteran support services and housing options available in Troy.

Community organizations worked to identify all veterans experiencing homelessness in their area, for example via the creation of a master list with real-time shelter and street outreach data that agency administrators can retrieve at any point in time. The Long Island Veteran Working Group has found that maintaining a list of homeless veterans who will accept housing has encouraged providers to increase the number of dedicated beds for homeless veterans.

A key approach, these organizations have found, is to provide shelter immediately to any veteran experiencing unsheltered homelessness who requests assistance. For example, the cities of Syracuse and Troy provide 24/7 access to shelter and services. Veterans can come off the streets and into shelter at any time of day or night.

Shelters that are low barrier (i.e., have no preconditions such as sobriety) facilitate access to shelter, especially among homeless veterans with substance abuse issues. Many homeless shelters and permanent housing programs require sobriety as a condition to remain in shelter or housed. By providing the option of low-barrier shelters, communities can help prevent veterans from returning to the streets while they attain self-sufficiency.

The communities applied the Housing First model to provide rapid rehousing for homeless veterans. The Housing First model provides individuals who are experiencing homelessness, particularly those who have been homeless for prolonged periods and have disabling conditions such as major depression, PTSD or addiction, with permanent housing as quickly as possible and supportive services as needed. The Housing First approach provides housing without prerequisites for abstinence, psychiatric stability, or completion of treatment programs.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> VA National Center on Homelessness among Veterans. *Housing First Implementation Brief*, 2014.

## Appendix C -- Glossary

Sources include the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's Glossary of Homeless Management Information System (HMIS) Definitions and Acronyms, the 2010 Supplemental Veteran Homelessness Report to Congress and the 2014 Annual Homeless Assessment Report to Congress.

**Annual Homeless Assessment Report (AHAR)** is the annual report to Congress on the extent and nature of homelessness.

**Chronically Homeless Individuals** – HUD adopted the Federal definition for chronically homeless individuals: “either (1) an unaccompanied homeless individual with a disabling condition who has been continuously homeless for a year or more, OR (2) an unaccompanied individual with a disabling condition who has had at least four episodes of homelessness in the past three years.”<sup>18</sup>

**Continuum of Care (CoC)** is a community with a unified plan to organize and deliver housing services to meet the specific needs of people who are homeless as they move to stable housing and maximize self-sufficiency. HUD funds many homeless programs and HMIS implementations through Continuum of Care grants.

**Continuum of Care Programs** are designed to: promote community-wide commitment to the goal of ending homelessness; provide funding for efforts by nonprofit providers and State and local governments to quickly rehouse homeless individuals and families, while minimizing the trauma and dislocation caused to homeless individuals, families, and communities by homelessness; promote access to and effect utilization of mainstream programs by homeless individuals and families; and optimize self-sufficiency among individuals and families experiencing homelessness.

**Homeless Management Information System (HMIS)** is the computerized data collection tool designed to capture client-level information over time on the characteristics and service needs of men, women, and children experiencing homelessness. Each CoC maintains its own HMIS, which can be tailored to meet local needs, but must also conform to HUD's HMIS Data and Technical Standards.

**HMIS Data** provide an unduplicated count of people who are homeless in shelter and information about their characteristics and service-use patterns over a one-year period of time. These data are entered into each CoC's HMIS at the client level but are submitted in aggregate form for the AHAR.

**HUD-VA Supportive Housing (HUD-VASH)** program is a collaborative initiative that combines HUD's Housing Choice Vouchers rental assistance for homeless veterans with case management and clinical services provided by the VA's health care system. HUD-VASH is intended to target the hardest-to-serve population of veterans (chronically homeless with disabilities) and help them achieve long-term stability. In addition to

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<sup>18</sup> See <https://www.hudexchange.info/resources/documents/DefiningChronicHomeless.pdf>.

housing, the program provides targeted supportive services such as case management, mental health services, substance use services, and social support.

**Permanent Supportive Housing** is designed to provide housing and supportive services on a long-term basis for formerly homeless people who have disabilities.

**Point-in-Time (PIT)** is a snapshot of the homeless population taken on a given day. Since 2005, HUD requires all CoC applicants to complete this count every other year in the last week of January. This count includes a street count in addition to a count of all clients in emergency and transitional beds.

**Supportive Services for Veteran Families (SSVF)** program provides supportive services to low-income veterans and their families who are living in or transitioning to permanent housing. The program aims to promote housing stability among veterans by providing time-limited payments to landlords, utility companies, child care providers, and others to help veterans and their families stay in housing.

**Transitional Housing Program** provides homeless people a place to stay combined with supportive services for up to 24 months in order to help them overcome barriers to moving into and retaining permanent housing.

**Unduplicated Count of Sheltered Homelessness** is an estimate of people in shelter that counts each person only once, even if the person enters and exits the shelter system multiple times throughout the year within a CoC.

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