

# Perspectives on Ending Veteran Homelessness

with Susan Angell, Executive Director\*, Homeless Veterans Initiative, U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs; and Mark Johnston, Acting Assistant Secretary, Office of Community Planning and Development, U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development

*\*Editor's note: Since this interview Susan Angell has retired from public service. We wish her all the best.*

## Setting Context: *Opening Doors*—A Comprehensive National Strategy to Prevent and End Homelessness



Mark Johnston

Let me set some context. For years the federal government has been trying to confront homelessness, but with the release in 2010 of *Opening Doors*, it is the first time we've ever actually had a strategic plan—a roadmap for joint action—to end it. In the past, we've tried to manage it, we've tried to address it, but we've never been committed to actually ending homelessness.

The 19 agencies that make up the U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness devised a plan of action recognizing that there are various subpopulations of the homeless that we needed to focus on if we're going to strategically end this problem. The goals include ending chronic homelessness, ending veteran homelessness, and ending family and children's homelessness. The last goal was to help set the path forward to ending all other forms of homelessness that may not fit into these categories, such as single individuals that don't have disability. Our primary focus is chronic homelessness, veteran homelessness, and family and youth homelessness.



Susan Angell

We share, both VA and HUD, an agency priority goal through the White House Office of Management and Budget, and this goal aligns our objective of ending veteran homelessness as it's outlined in *Opening Doors*. The VA plan, specifically the six key areas we address, is outreach, treatment, prevention, housing, income, and very importantly, community partnerships.



## Pursuing a Housing First Approach to Ending Veteran Homelessness



Mark Johnston

The concept of Housing First was pioneered by Dr. Sam Tsemberis. It places emphasis on getting people housed first. Once you're housed, one of our most basic needs in life, then you can start focusing on the other issues such as drug dependence or mental health issues.

At first many groups were skeptical of this approach. Even HUD was concerned, and so we did a national study to get a sense of how well it worked. We were quite impressed with the results. About 84 percent of all chronically homeless—

persons living on the streets with a mental illness—were [still] housed a year after they were placed into their own apartments. This approach is effective and we have been touting it with the VA for four years now; it's the solution for people that need long-term permanent housing.



Susan Angell

For the VA, Housing First was a tough concept to accept and pursue. However, I think Housing First is a perfect example of where the community showed us this is what needs to happen. It is a very successful way to target and use our resources. We picked it up, we used it, and it is working for us, as well as for our veterans. I also think Secretary Shinseki recognizes that creativity comes from the localities and communities. In fact, they are why we have such a robust SSVF program, which is completely executed in the community by the external providers.



Mark Johnston

When I first heard about Housing First, I'm a visual person, and so I wanted to see it. I went to New York City to check it out. It was really my conversations with clients who benefit from this approach that persuaded me of its effectiveness. The other benefits go beyond just that person. What we've seen through studies is that if you don't act, if you don't use Housing First and you let people stay on the streets, it's going to cost your city often \$40,000, \$50,000, \$60,000 a year per person as they're cycling through these systems of jails, mental hospitals, or emergency rooms. It becomes clear: not doing anything costs a lot of money, doing something that actually solves the person's housing crisis can, in fact, save the city money.

## Characteristics of the Homeless Veteran Population



Susan Angell

Homeless veterans are typically males between the ages of 31 and 61. They have many risk factors for homelessness—poverty, lack of good health and support services, unemployment, and a lack of access to affordable housing. They might have disabling psychological conditions, like post-traumatic stress, traumatic brain injury, domestic violence, drug and alcohol issues, physical and mental illness, past history of incarceration, and/or a difficult transition from active duty service. Of all the risk factors, poverty is the number-one risk factor. Another unique factor for veterans, they are usually entering the homeless service provision area by themselves. They don't come with families or partners. They are by themselves, so there is quite a bit of isolation.



## Veteran Homelessness Annual Assessment: Gaining Insight and Understanding



Mark Johnston

For years HUD had limited data on homelessness; it was hard to get a handle on how to solve the problem without having good data. In 2005, we started collecting data in a very systematic way where each community was required to give us different kinds of information. We've collected point-in-time information; in January every city collects information on how many homeless persons they have and in what category, such as how many are single, how many are families, et cetera.

We also realized that over time homelessness looks quite different. At a point in time, we have about 636,000 people who are homeless on any given day. However, over the course of a year, we find that there are about two million homeless people. HUD produces these two types of estimates, with the VA collaborating on those involving veterans. Our annual report to Congress looks at point-in-time estimates of sheltered and unsheltered homeless veterans on a single night, as well as longitudinal data. It's from that report that we gain a better understanding and are able to know certain things, like we have about 60,000 homeless veterans. We know that of all adults about 13 percent are veterans; we also know that in the last two years we've been able to reduce veteran homelessness by about 18 percent.



## Breaking Down Silos and Pursuing a Shared Leadership Approach



Susan Angell

Breaking down the silos within government is critically important. I think it is really the foundation of our success. We have a shared leadership approach that is very important to both of our organizations. To that end, VA Secretary Shinseki and HUD Secretary Donovan have agreed to form a two-year leadership team for the United States Interagency Council on Homelessness, which facilitates long-term planning and goal setting for the 19 member agencies. This is a first time really, and the commitment shows how closely VA and HUD are working together. We also are pursuing shared leadership by reviewing data together. We develop joint interventions in communities that are struggling. We team on opportunities like doing this show so we can jointly get the message out to people that government is working together as a team to solve a very critical social problem in our country. We do things like joint briefings to Congress. Everything VA and HUD can do together to be successful in our efforts we do.

## HUD-Veterans Affairs Supportive Housing (HUD-VASH) Program



Mark Johnston

As a young staffer, over 20 years ago, I had the opportunity to work with the VA and my partners at HUD to help create the HUD-VA Supportive Housing Program. It is a unique program. This is the only instance I know of where two federal agencies jointly administer a single program. We at HUD use our expertise providing rental assistance and rely on the VA

to provide outreach and clinical services to veterans. In a nutshell, we do the housing and VA does the services. Our efforts have proven that this program works especially [well] for people living on the streets and homeless for a very long period of time. The U.S. Congress, whom we jointly developed this with many years ago, has given us a lot of flexibility on using the HUD-VASH program, providing us funding support each and every year. Even through these tough, tough budget times, we continue to get an appropriation for this program and it makes a real difference.



Susan Angell

The HUD-VASH program has probably been one of our most effective ways to end veteran homelessness; it is the housing part of ending homelessness that VA does not have the authority to provide. Our partnership makes it possible. We currently have about 48,000 vouchers to use and because of our joint efforts we have housed 41,000 veterans in these HUD-VASH units. At this point in time, we're targeting our HUD-VASH resources to our most chronic, most in-need veterans; it's also a great asset for us for those homeless veterans that may not quite fit into transitional housing or other programs such as a single parent with kids. HUD-VASH is a great option for single parents with kids.

## Working Together to Improve Operations



Mark Johnston

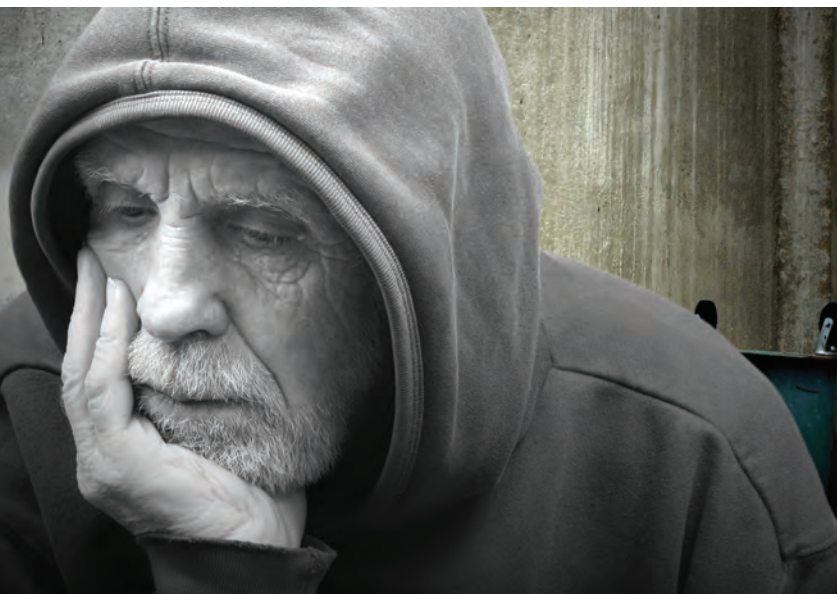
This strong partnership we've developed over the last four years has enhanced our ability to administer programs. We have streamlined programs so that we're able to house veterans much more quickly than before. We've been able to implement the Housing First concept in HUD-VASH. We're also capable of targeting particular communities that have the highest need. We are also looking for and rewarding communities that quickly house veterans. These are all innovations and developments that have occurred just in the last couple of years because of our partnership.



Susan Angell

We learn our best lessons when we go out to the field together as a team, to a community that might be struggling with some processes. We sit with these folks to really understand the issues and challenges they are facing. We see if there's something we can do from a policy perspective, a change that we can make, that may help them. We also bring them resources to help them improve their processes.

And when we look at our data, our accomplishments together, we really can tell each other if you could do this a





little bit faster, we could do this a little bit better, so it's really a very transparent, an open partnership where we share data, we share struggles, and we share successes.

## Using HUDStat to Boost Results



Mark Johnston

HUD Secretary Shaun Donovan used to head the New York City Department of Housing Preservation and Development, where he used a CityStat management tool to drive performance. He brought this concept to HUD. He leads quarterly reviews, known as HUDStat, to drive performance improvement across the department. It really allows various offices across HUD to engage with a wide variety of performance data, so this effort can really focus all of us on identifying and solving problems.

HUDStat meetings involve many different folks from HUD, from headquarters and field, but when we review the veteran homelessness efforts our VA partner is at our side. In fact, Secretary Donovan and the VA deputy secretary have jointly led the HUDStat meetings on ending veteran homelessness. It's during these sessions that we discuss what's working, but more importantly what's not and needs to be turned around. Putting a finer point on this aspect, I remember after the very first HUDStat meeting I spoke with Secretary Donovan at a National Homeless Veterans Conference. I asked him what he thought about our first meeting, which occurred the day before. He was quite clear that he wanted to see actual problems that we couldn't solve at our level, but that we

needed to get together at a higher level to tackle. He never saw a dog-and-pony show again. At these meetings, we tee up tough issues we're grappling with and ask for guidance, always trying to find better ways to deal with tough issues.

We also seek to address and solve problems such as process bottlenecks and operational issues by making sure we're thinking beyond the Beltway. To that end, all of our HUDStat meetings, including those on ending veteran homelessness, involve field offices and other communities. For instance, we have had calls that included the HUD team in LA and the VA team in LA. Leadership can directly ask the local staff about the particular issue they may be facing or confer on issues we're hearing about at headquarters. It is critically important to have these candid conversations across the country, so we can quickly identify what issues, processes, or policies may need fixing.

## Rapid Results Boot Camps



Susan Angell

We have these wonderful events called Rapid Results Boot Camps supported by Community Solutions, Inc., and the Rapid Results Institute. We bring staff from HUD, VA, Public Housing, anyone else who plays a role in this process. They come together as a team and for two-and-a-half days they work as a team. They look at processes, identify problems, and find gaps. The goal of these boot camps is for the team to set audacious 100-day goals that they commit to as a team. They go back to their sites to execute on their commitment. There are follow-up calls to assess progress and identify those who may need help. They share their progress with leaders every 30 days until we get to that 100-day point where we assess whether their goals were met. We're finding the competitiveness between different regions to make their goal is very helpful, it's very exciting, and it makes it fun for the teams; we're seeing better performance such as success in housing 100 veterans in 100 days or cutting a process that took 200 days in half. Once they have completed the initial 100-day goal, we've noticed these teams are excited, motivated, and proud.



Mark Johnston

I totally agree. We realize we can't do it all ourselves by any means. We had these two groups, Community Solutions and Rapid Results Institute, approach us and say, look, we think we could help. Rather than be defensive, we completely embraced it, and we now help fund these around the country. One of the reasons our local teams are moving forward so well relates to the Rapid Results boot camps.



## An Ounce of Prevention: Homelessness Prevention Rapid Re-Housing Program (HPRP) and Supportive Services for Veteran Families (SSVF) Program



Mark Johnston

As part of the Recovery Act, we ran the Homelessness Prevention Rapid Re-Housing program (HPRP), which was a huge program to stand up. It was \$1.5 billion. We were able to serve about 1.3 million people over the course of three years and learned a host of lessons. The program had two aspects: homelessness prevention and rapid re-housing. Rapid re-housing simply means if somebody becomes homeless let's rapidly re-house them into an apartment, pay rent and utilities for a short period, and even help with some case management. I think the most important lessons that I learned were twofold. First of all, we found that most homeless people we helped required a very small amount of investment to solve their homeless problem. A year after the assistance ended, about 90 percent of all families who received assistance were still housed. The cost was only about \$1,200 per person. This was a huge aha moment for us. We don't need an expensive, long-term intervention for every homeless person. We need to have tailored interventions, in specific dosages: if you're living on the streets for years you're probably going to need permanent housing and services for some time to come, but for most homeless people they will not need nearly that much intervention. The second important lesson is the realization that it's really tough to know who actually is going to become homeless tomorrow, just because you get evicted from your housing, just because you lose your job does not mean you'll automatically become homeless. In fact, in most cases, the vast majority of cases you don't. The lesson learned for us [was that] rapid re-housing is an incredibly cost-effective and efficient intervention.



Susan Angell

The VA's Supportive Services for Veteran Families (SSVF) program is absolutely modeled after the HPRP program. It represents one of the gifts of our partnership. We can learn from each other when developing support programs. They could show us lessons learned from the HPRP program, so that VA could avoid similar mistakes. Given the shared experience, we could really start our program very quickly, which we did. Our SSVF program has been immensely successful. In our first year of operation, we had hoped to serve about 22,000 participants for \$60 million, but in fact we served over 35,000 participants, and 8,800 of those were children. It is probably one of the most progressive, cost-effective, flexible programs that we have to help folks that are on the



verge of homelessness [be] rapidly re-housed as HPRP did. It is a paradigm shift because we reach out to the veteran and ask them what it is they need. Maybe they need some job or employment assistance, help with rent for a few weeks, or maybe child care assistance. Each intervention is based only on what that veteran and their family needs. As Mark said, it's about tailoring and dosage, making the intervention appropriate—the right intervention at the right time, for the right person. We are very excited about this program. We provided about \$100 million spread across 151 communities. Starting at the very end of this year/beginning of next year we will have \$300 million out to communities across the country. I think the other important piece is that this program is operated by community providers. They have done a phenomenal job.

## Providing Other Supportive Services for Veterans and their Families



Susan Angell

In VA, we certainly have a full range of health care and mental health [care] that we provide to our veterans. We have robust programs dedicated to substance abuse, PTSD, and traumatic brain injury. We also have a justice outreach program that provides services to folks coming out of prison as that's a group that's very likely to become homeless. We have these new mobile medical outreach teams that are actually going out into the community, on the street, and providing primary care to veterans in need. It's a way to engage the most chronically homeless, providing them care and using this as a way

to place them in safe housing. In our first year with only a few of these teams in certain communities, we have noticed a significant decline in emergency room visits and hospitalizations among homeless veterans.



Mark Johnston

We do have other programs, though not specifically targeted to veterans, to support them and make a big impact in helping them. The Continuum of Care Program is our primary grant program, funded to the tune of about \$1.7 billion, that houses all types of homeless persons. We serve many veterans through this program. In 2009, we were serving about 4,000; now it's closer to 12,000 homeless veterans through the Continuum of Care Program with a range of interventions, primarily permanent housing. We've been flat funded for about four years now, so we can't just rely on existing homeless programs to get it done. We are looking beyond our homeless programs. We're looking at mainstream programs at HUD, such as the Community Development Block Grant Program, Public Housing, and the Housing Choice Voucher Program. Even if a small fraction of these dollars can go to the homeless within a community, we can make more of an impact in reducing veteran homelessness.

## Raising Awareness about Available Programs for Homeless Veterans



Susan Angell

We find that one of the barriers to care is folks just don't understand how much is available to them. For our newest veterans, sometimes they will leave and not realize they have five years of free health care if they served in the war zone.



We had a campaign effort called Make the Call! We have a 24/7 call center for homeless veterans. We went across the country hitting 28 cities in two weeks; we did radio, TV, ribbon cuttings, stand-downs. We did all of this to talk about our Make the Call! Anybody who comes in contact with a homeless veteran or someone who is at risk can call this number and they will get a warm hand-off to services close to their geographic area. The people staffing this call center 24/7 are professionals. Many of them are veterans themselves; they really understand what the struggles are; they truly understand how hard it is to make the first call. After our campaign push, we increased the quantity of calls to the call center by over 200 percent. Our first year, we were receiving about 10,000 calls a year; now we're getting 10,000 calls a month. It's really become a critical door opener for veterans that need assistance.

VA also has very specific outreach coordinators in each of the medical centers, whose job it is to go out into the community and veteran service organizations and invite them to come in for care. Our vet centers are one of our best outreach assets. We have 300 vet centers across the nation; they're primarily staffed by fellow combat veterans, so the credibility—that vet-to-vet contact—makes it so much easier for a fellow veteran to come into a site, understand what the services are and feel comfortable, welcomed, and respected. These vet centers also have mobile vet centers. These great big buses equipped with offices and technology such that they can go out to an event and provide care, counseling, and enroll eligible vets into the VA system for care. We take these mobile vet centers on the road into very rural areas on a regular basis to provide services to vets in those hard-to-reach communities.

We also organize stand-downs across the country. These are events that occur usually once a year for one or two or three days. The entire community comes together—VA, local service provider, social services, whatever a veteran might need, food, shelter, clothing, health screenings—all these services are available during stand-downs. Last year, we had 206 stand-downs across the country. We have found that our veterans love stand-downs. It's a familiar military term. We reach out to them in a way that they're comfortable. We want to take care of you. It's a huge community event.

## Focusing on the Future



Mark Johnston

We have a little less than three years to end veteran homelessness, and it is going to be challenging. We have had an 18-percent reduction in the last two years, so it wasn't just progress in one particular year. For the next year's budget, we requested a 25-percent increase in HUD's homeless account.



I don't think you'll see that anywhere in government, especially in this era. We asked for it because we show results, we can demonstrate outcomes, and we can actually solve homelessness.



Susan Angell

On the VA side, we actually came to a mutual decision that using those various HUD-VASH vouchers for our most needy is probably one of the most effective ways we're going to end homelessness because that is going to be our hardest population; this program comes with the kinds of care and support services to keep someone in housing once we get them there. Our SSVF program is also critically important—it's economical, it's flexible, it's very easy for our veterans to use, so we intend to keep up funding for that program.

## Anticipating the Needs of Returning Veterans from Iraq and Afghanistan



Susan Angell

We are really keeping an eye on our Operation Iraqi Freedom, Enduring Freedom, and New Dawn population. The SSVF program is probably the program for this group because they haven't been out long enough where they are chronically homeless and they just may have significant employment issues. We know that the unemployment rate for this population is one of the highest, so we're really working with the Department of Defense to make sure we have good transitions services and job assistance services available. Right now, this population only constitutes about 5.5 percent of

our homeless population. We can provide serious support to these folks as they transition and minimize their vulnerability.

## Leveraging Innovation and Advances in Technology



Mark Johnston

We are doing many different things. Let me just mention one from the HUD side, we have developed a tool for communities so they can look at the data they have from our point in time, from the annual homeless assessment report, and other data so they can make informed decisions on how to reallocate or restructure their homeless system. Many communities have a homeless support system that was implemented 15 years ago with little changes made to date. With limited dollars, it is a necessity for many of these communities to restructure, reallocate, and redirect funds and resources to more strategically target and respond. We now have an online tool for them to use to do just this.



Susan Angell

We have a couple of areas where we're using technology. We have right now a homeless registry that goes back several years where we can actually identify and track every single veteran who has come to the VA for any kind of homeless care. We can see how they move across the country, the kinds of services they need, what works, what hasn't worked. This tool has been incredibly helpful to us.

We partnered up with Bon Jovi and he sponsored an app competition that resulted in an effort called Project Reach (Real-Time Electronic Access for Caregivers and the Homeless). This is a smartphone app that anybody can download. It will tell you in New Jersey what services are available for the homeless. A provider, community member, or a veteran family member can use this app and find out what resources are available to assist them. The app identifies the location, gives its hours of operation, and services that are available.

## Collaboration and Pushing Each Other to be Better



Susan Angell

We are invited to speak about our efforts and really get into the nuts and bolts of it often. When you're talking to a group of 30 up-and-coming federal leaders, the notion of having a shared mission, sharing resources, and sharing data makes a serious impression. We have to be willing to talk about it in a transparent manner. You have to trust that the other organization has the same good will and goal in front





of them as you do; it takes time and far more than meetings. You have to look at your data, you have to be able to say, wow, you failed on that one, how can we help you do better? If we just did dog-and-pony shows at our HUDStat meetings we really wouldn't get very far, so we don't. We constantly push each other to be better.



Mark Johnston

I think one of the important lessons for me is having a program that you actually jointly share, jointly own; it is a powerful way to govern that we don't do enough of in the federal government. We all have our own little silos and there's no real incentive to work across agency boundaries. Collaboration is key, but as Susan said, it's not easy to do. Our departments' cultures couldn't be more different in terms of size, the work we do, the way we're organized, so it takes time and a commitment to do what we are doing. Having a shared program and a shared goal helps forge more meaningful collaboration.

## Receiving the Service to America Medal from the Partnership for Public Service



Susan Angell

I think that one of the most important things that came out of receiving this award: it really shows the American people that government agencies can work together to solve very, very difficult problems. It shows that we can share a goal, have a common passion, and achieve a very, very challenging

mission. I think that's something that the American people need to hear: we're using public money well and we're serving the veterans who served us. It's really hard, but working together we're actually getting the job done.



Mark Johnston

I would say almost the same thing, the notion of teamwork; Susan and I work together all the time. We had a great team of six that got that award because there are various parts to our agencies that have to work together to make this whole thing successful. The other thing is something that also Susan mentioned, and that is it was just reaffirming to me that if we're focused in a very strategic, thoughtful way on a particular problem that we can [possibly] solve it.

## Making a Difference



Susan Angell

I joined the VA as a social worker and really never had any big dreams about being in a leadership position. I've been able to have a federal career that's been filled with challenges and opportunities. I've been able to respond to nine disasters. I've been able to go to Afghanistan on loan to help there with health care. There are so many opportunities in federal government that when you first start you don't quite realize that, but each time you raise your hand for a new mission or a new challenge you can have one of the richest careers you could possibly hope for in federal service.



Mark Johnston

I came to government as a Presidential Management Fellow 30 years ago, and had always known, at least since I was in college, that I really wanted to do something in public service. I can't imagine finding a career more satisfying. It doesn't mean you have to be in one agency. I've worked in three different agencies and probably 20 different jobs. There are really wonderful opportunities to make an impact in government. ■

To learn more about the initiative to end veteran homelessness, go to [www.va.gov/homeless/about\\_the\\_initiative.asp](http://www.va.gov/homeless/about_the_initiative.asp) and [portal.hud.gov/hudportal/documents/huddoc?id=FY13BudFSPrvntEndHmlsns.pdf](http://portal.hud.gov/hudportal/documents/huddoc?id=FY13BudFSPrvntEndHmlsns.pdf).



To hear *The Business of Government Hour's* interview with Susan Angell and Mark Johnston, go to the Center's website at [www.businessofgovernment.org](http://www.businessofgovernment.org).



To download the show as a podcast on your computer or MP3 player, from the Center's website at [www.businessofgovernment.org](http://www.businessofgovernment.org), right click on an audio segment, select Save Target As, and save the file.



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