Guidance for Counting Veterans During 2011 Point-in-Time Counts of Homeless People

The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) funds local homeless assistance planning networks called Continuums of Care (CoCs). The primary responsibility of a CoC is to organize and deliver housing and services for people who are homeless in each community. HUD requires CoCs to undertake a community-wide effort to collect information on the number and characteristics of individuals and families experiencing homelessness on a single night. These one-night counts, called point-in-time counts (PIT), must be conducted at least every two years (in odd calendar years) during the last ten days in January, according to HUD's standards. The PIT count also includes estimates of particular homeless subpopulations, such as chronically homeless people, veterans, and unaccompanied children.

Planning for the 2011 count is already underway in many communities. This guidance is meant to assist communities in planning for the upcoming count. It first reviews why point-in-time counts are important and highlights changes to collecting veteran data in 2011. It also offers specific approaches and strategies for fostering collaborations between CoC and local Veterans Affairs (VA) resources to ensure every homeless veteran is counted. Lastly, the guidance outlines recommended questions for determining if someone is a veteran and provides links to additional resources.

Why is the PIT Count Important?

Collecting accurate data on the number and characteristics of individuals and families experiencing homelessness is a critical part of local homeless planning and program development. Having accurate data on both the sheltered and unsheltered homeless population can help communities:

- Understand changes in trends among homeless populations;
- Adjust the types of programs and services available according to need and use resources as efficiently as possible;
- Justify requests for additional resources and/or programming modifications;
- Comply with reporting requirements for HUD, the VA, other funders, and local stakeholders;
- Raise public awareness about the issue of homelessness; and
- Measure the community's progress towards preventing and ending homelessness.

On a national level, HUD, the VA, and the U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness have jointly endorsed a national strategic goal of preventing and ending homelessness among veterans in 5 years, and among children, youth, and families in 10 years. The federal government is increasingly using HUD's PIT data and the longitudinal data collected by Homeless Management Information Systems (HMIS) as the primary sources to understand changes in homeless trends and track progress in eliminating homelessness. These data are reported annually in the congressionally-mandated Annual Homeless Assessment Report (AHAR). The report describes the number and characteristics of people experiencing homelessness in the U.S., as well as trends in these data since 2007.

Homeless Veteran Data – Past and Future

In past years, data on the number of veterans experiencing homelessness often differed across data sources (e.g., HUD PIT, VA CHALENG). This is largely because of different methodological approaches to collecting the information. In 2011, HUD and the VA have agreed to use the HUD PIT count as the definitive federal estimate of veteran homelessness. Therefore, it is critical that local VA programs and staff participate in the planning and implementation of the PIT count.

The 2011 PIT count will be the first year that HUD requires CoCs to count all homeless veterans – both those living in shelters and those sleeping in places not mean for human habitation (e.g., on the street, in cars, in encampments). In the past HUD only required communities to count sheltered homeless veterans. The 2011 change will make the PIT estimate of homeless veterans – a subpopulation that has been historically undercounted – more complete.

How Can CoC and VA Staff Collaborate to Count Every Homeless Veteran?

Conducting a PIT count of homeless veterans is challenging because a person's veteran status is not visibly discernable and will likely require enumerators to interview homeless people. For a sheltered count, it is important to know about, engage, and incorporate all emergency and transitional housing programs and beds that are dedicated to veterans. Locating, counting, and interviewing unsheltered homeless veterans during the PIT count is an even bigger challenge. Besides the logistical challenges involved in locating veterans, it is important to understand how to engage them and phrase survey questions to successfully collect the needed information.

Because the VA has housing and service programs targeting homeless veterans, it is critical that local VA staff are engaged and participate in both the sheltered and unsheltered PIT count. Ultimately, combining CoC and VA knowledge and resources will result in a more thorough and accurate count. Below are some suggestions about specific ways local CoCs and Veterans Affairs can collaborate:

1. *Engage the local VA Medical Center and VA department staff that provide services to homeless veterans or work on homeless issues to help plan and implement the count.* Knowledgeable, experienced staff can help:

   - *Locate sheltered and unsheltered veterans.* VA Medical Centers have homeless coordinators and outreach workers who regularly interact with homeless veterans. These staff are knowledgeable about the locations where unsheltered homeless veterans live, sleep, and congregate and can identify the places that must be included in the unsheltered count. These individuals can also help make sure the roster of housing programs for homeless veterans is complete for the sheltered count and identify any other VA-funded service centers that should be involved, such as Community Based Outpatient Clinics (CBOCs), Vet Centers, and Women Vet Programs.

   - *Provide guidance on count and survey instruments.* VA staff can offer technical guidance to improve data accuracy.

   - *Assist during the count.* Veteran homeless coordinators and outreach workers can form special teams to canvass encampments and other remote areas that may not have

been included in previous counts. Their relationships with clients could also help homeless veterans feel more comfortable providing information.

2. ***Reach out to local Veteran Service Organizations (e.g. American Legion, Disabled American Veterans) for their cooperation with the count.*** Especially in rural areas where there may not be many homeless service providers, Veteran Service Organizations (VSOs) provide assistance to homeless veterans and their families. Some VSOs have funds that are set aside to assist these families with motel vouchers and utility payments.

3. ***Recruit homeless or formerly homeless veterans to be enumerators for the unsheltered count.*** Homeless veterans can be an indispensible resource while planning and conducting a PIT count. Before the count, they can assist in identifying those locations where unsheltered homeless veterans may be living. They can also participate in the count itself, as they may be able to gain the trust of homeless veterans more easily than other staff or volunteers and thus have more success completing surveys.

Contact information for VA staff is available in the VA's CHALENG Report. The report lists local VA contacts by region in Appendix 8, beginning on page 170.

CoC contact information is available on HUD's Homelessness Resource Exchange (HRE) at www.hudhre.info . Click on CoC Maps, Contacts, Reports and Awards in the Quick Links section.

Who is Considered a Veteran?
To accurately record and track the number of homeless veterans, it is important to use a consistent definition. For the purposes of the PIT count, CoCs should use the definition provided in HUD's Revised HMIS Data Standards:[1]

> "A veteran is someone who has served on active duty in the Armed Forces of the United States. This does not include inactive military reserves or the National Guard unless the person was called up to active duty."

Note: "activated" is receiving orders to go into combat or to serve stateside.

What Questions Can Determine Veteran Status?
Veteran status is collected in a CoC's PIT survey of sheltered and unsheltered people. Therefore, it is important that the CoC's survey instrument collect enough information to consistently determine if a person is a veteran. HUD and the VA require the following questions to determine a person's veteran status:

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[1] Homeless Management Information System (HMIS) Data Standards Revised Notice. U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, Office of Community Planning and Development. March 2010. http://www.hmis.info/ClassicAsp/documents/Final%20HMIS%20Data%20Standards-Revised%20_3.pdf

1. Have you served in the U.S. Armed Forces?
   a. Yes
   b. No
   c. Don't Know
   d. Refused

2. Were you activated, into active duty, as a member of the National Guard or as a Reservist?
   a. Yes
   b. No
   c. Don't Know
   d. Refused

If the respondent answers yes to either question, he or she is considered a veteran. If the respondent answers no to both questions, he or she is not considered a veteran.

Questions about the PIT Count or Collecting Veteran Data?
Questions about the PIT count should be submitted to HUD's Virtual Help Desk () on the Homelessness Resource Exchange (HRE) at www.hudhre.info . Select PIT as topic and subtopic.