



RESEARCH BRIEF

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Challenges and Strategies for Serving Unstably Housed Veterans in Rural Areas: Evidence from the Supportive Services for Veteran Families (SSVF) Program

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Introduction

Although rural Veterans account for roughly one of seven Veterans experiencing homelessness on a given night, there is limited research about the nature of their housing instability and homelessness. Most research that seeks to understand “what works” for serving Veterans experiencing homelessness has been conducted in urban settings. Based on interviews with Supportive Services for Veteran Families (SSVF) grantees, this report addresses challenges to serving Veterans in rural areas and proposes strategies and needed resources for overcoming them.

Methods

The SSVF program awards grants from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to community-based agencies to provide homelessness prevention and rapid rehousing services to eligible Veterans and their family members. SSVF offers a range of services including case management, temporary financial assistance, and linkages to VA health care and benefits as well as other mainstream services. In fiscal year 2018, 311 SSVF grantees were active in all 50 states and offered services in almost every county in the country. Roughly 15% of SSVF grantees serve exclusively rural areas and about two-thirds have rural communities in their service catchment area.

We conducted qualitative telephone interviews with a stratified random sample of 24 SSVF grantees who serve exclusively rural areas—six providers in each of the four regions of the U.S. (Midwest, Northeast, South, and West). The 24 grantees we interviewed provide services in 17 different states. We sent invitations to contacts at 30 agencies who identified the appropriate staff member(s) to participate in an interview; respondent roles varied (e.g., Program Director, Agency Director, Case Manager, Chief Operations Officer). Interviews, lasting approximately 60 minutes, explored the housing needs, available services, and needed resources to support unstably housed Veterans in rural areas. Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim, and a template analysis approach was used to analyze transcripts.

Challenges and Strategies for Serving Veterans Experiencing Homelessness and Housing Instability in Rural Areas

Based on feedback from SSVF grantees, we identified three broad categories of challenges to serving unstably housed Veterans in rural areas:

- Identifying unstably housed Veterans in rural areas
- Providing services given the resource context in rural areas
- Leveraging effective collaboration to serve Veterans in rural areas

IDENTIFYING UNSTABLY HOUSED VETERANS IN RURAL AREAS

SSVF grantees working in rural settings are typically responsible for serving large geographic areas that are sparsely populated. Interview respondents reported limited availability of emergency shelter in these areas and noted that individuals meeting the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's (HUD) definition of literal homelessness are most often staying in a range of locations not meant for human habitation, including sheds, porches, abandoned buildings, garages, tents, campers without utilities, deer blinds, or other sub-standard structures. Respondents noted that this wide array of living situations makes it difficult to identify these Veterans; several respondents suggested that identification of literally homeless Veterans is much easier in urban areas where emergency shelter is more widely available and a larger proportion of Veterans come into contact with formal homeless assistance systems.

Respondents also reported that homelessness looks different in rural areas, with more persons experiencing housing instability or living in housing of extremely poor quality, but not necessarily meeting the HUD criteria for literal homelessness. In particular, respondents reported that "couch surfing" (i.e., staying temporarily in a series of other people's homes, making use of improvised sleeping arrangements) is the predominant form of housing instability in rural areas, often due to a lack of emergency shelter as an alternative. As one respondent put it:

In the rural areas, some places don't have shelters and they use couch surfing as a form of shelter, but they're literally homeless. They consider themselves literally homeless, but the way it's written, you know, couch surfing doesn't qualify.

As this respondent and many others noted, SSVF grantees serving rural areas face challenges assisting Veterans who are couch surfing because program guidelines prioritize serving literally homeless Veterans and limit the proportion of households who are at risk of (but not literally) homeless. In response to these challenges, respondents reported a number of strategies for identifying Veterans in rural settings, including innovative outreach approaches and coordinated entry.

Implementing innovative outreach approaches. Respondents described a wide range of creative strategies to identify Veterans experiencing housing instability in rural areas:

- Conducting direct outreach to individuals working in public organizations (e.g., post offices, town halls, county commissioners, law enforcement) and private businesses (e.g., grocery stores, liquor stores, laundromats) who may encounter unstably housed Veterans in their day-to-day work.
- Keeping in touch with specific groups or individuals—including park rangers, railroad engineers, and bicycle groups

Box 1: Innovative Outreach

Some of our areas . . . it's almost barren. You can't find anybody, especially in the winter months. It's hard. So we contact the railroads, the engineers. We contact park rangers, cycle groups. We have the technology, iPhones or work phones, like "Hey, drop [a pin] in your location if you see someone." We have street outreach specialists. "Drop [a pin in] your location and we'll get to that area." So, we try to really use the folks around us that are always out and about, try to make a partnership or have them realize hey, we're here, and we just want to help this person.

who organize rides along rural roads—whose activities may put them in a position to encounter homeless encampments or Veterans in other situations not meant for human habitation located in remote areas. (See Box 1.)

- Setting up their own dedicated phone hotlines or web-based intake portals to make it easy for Veterans seeking services to connect with SSVF grantees.
- Working directly with private landlords on an ongoing basis, asking them to identify and refer current Veteran tenants who may have fallen behind on rent or experienced some other issue placing the stability of their housing in jeopardy.

Advancing coordinated entry systems. As a requirement to receive federal homeless assistance funding from HUD, communities are required to establish a coordinated entry system that has the goal of developing and implementing a standardized set of procedures by which all individuals experiencing housing crises are identified and assessed for and connected with available housing assistance resources. HUD’s stated goal for coordinated entry systems is to ensure that available assistance is allocated as effectively as possible and is easily accessible regardless of where or how individuals present for housing assistance.

Most respondents reported that their agencies are active participants in the coordinated entry systems in the HUD Continuums of Care (CoC) in which they work, and many are the lead agency for the coordinated entry system, allowing them to adopt innovative practices suited to the rural context. For example, one respondent had developed a web-based coordinated entry system that sends real-time alerts to agency staff as soon as someone begins entering information into the online system, a feature that allows for immediate engagement with Veterans. Other respondents, while not functioning as the lead for the entire CoC, served as the central intake point for all Veterans so that those seeking services in the CoC are referred to the agency.

Respondents also reported several practices tied to the coordinated entry process that help them more easily identify Veterans, including:

- Maintaining and regularly updating by-name lists of Veterans (i.e., a continuously updated list of all Veterans known to be experiencing homelessness in a community) and/or Google Docs of homeless/unstably housed Veterans who were on the radar of any service provider in the CoC.
- Conducting regular case conferences with other service providers as part of the coordinated entry process to more efficiently identify and engage Veterans.

PROVIDING SERVICES GIVEN THE RESOURCE CONTEXT IN RURAL AREAS

Many respondents talked at length about the challenge of working in rural areas where formal and informal resources to address housing instability specifically—and social, economic, and health needs more broadly—are highly limited. They noted the overall lack of (and corresponding need for) emergency shelter as a vital short-term housing arrangement for Veterans seeking a more stable situation. Virtually all respondents highlighted the lack of transportation as a primary challenge to serving Veterans experiencing housing instability in rural areas, making it difficult for Veterans to access the often limited services available in rural areas and severely restricting housing options that are accessible to health care, other services, and employment opportunities. One respondent described the challenge as follows:

When you're dealing with the rural Veteran that doesn't have any transportation, or any quality transportation, that makes it extremely difficult to get them basically stably housed, and basically build around a plan to allow them to basically get those wrap-around services, because they don't have transportation to get from point A to point B, whether it be health care, or employment or anything like that.

Respondents described a number of creative ways that they had adapted their service delivery models to respond to the unique challenges of the rural context. Many noted the importance of combining a range of different resources to complement one another and meet Veterans' needs. Strategies that merit particular mention include flexible case management and supportive services to assist households in sustaining housing stability as well as incorporating specialists in staffing and emergency shelter in the continuum of housing services provided.

Flexible case management models. Several respondents described adopting flexible case management models tailored to the rural settings including:

- Creating a 1-800 number for Veterans to call to connect with a case manager at any time.
- Using a telehealth model for case management.
- Implementing a mobile case management model in which case managers travel to meet Veterans wherever they are. Case managers have the ability to transport Veterans to appointments and often use the time in transit to develop rapport and address Veterans' other needs. In at least one case, the mobile case management model provides vehicles leased using SSVF funds. These models also leverage technology by providing case managers with internet-connected mobile devices and scanners so they can provide services without needing a formal office. (See Box 2.)

Box 2: Mobile Case Management

The way our model works, it's completely mobile. We have no office whatsoever. . .so we serve the whole state with mobile case managers . . .We give them a [car] and a laptop, cell phone, mobile Internet to meet the Veterans where they are. . .The fact that our model is mobile, and we're bringing services to the Veteran, changes everything for the Veteran, because the alternative is you're finding a way to get all of these Veterans in a rural area to an urban area, which—I mean that's an inevitability depending on what the service is—but there's also a basic level of service that could probably be provided on a more flexible basis by all organizations or agencies in all types of fields, too. And that's where we try to have our motto bridge that gap, by saying, "We'll pick you up and bring you."

Including specialists positions in staffing structures. SSVF program staffing structures varied, but a number of respondents described having various specialists positions as part of their SSVF or agency staff. These specialists are seen as critical in rural areas where, in contrast to comparatively better resourced urban areas, the services they provide are not otherwise available through another service provider. Specialists positions that respondents described include:

- Supplemental Security Income/Social Security Disability Income (SSI/SSDI) Outreach, Access and Recovery (SOAR) Specialist to help eligible Veterans obtain SSI or SSDI benefits.

- Housing Specialists to engage landlords and identify housing options for Veterans.
- Peer Support Specialists, who were frequently described as being especially useful for assisting with transportation.
- Employment Specialists, or access to these specialists through other entities, such as the Homeless Veteran Reintegration Program or Veteran Employment Specialists working for state workforce development agencies.

Several respondents raised concerns that, while they viewed specialist positions as important and felt the SSVF program strongly encourages them to hire specialists, they did not have adequate budgetary resources from SSVF (or from other sources) to hire such specialists.

Supporting housing stability. A number of respondents talked about the importance of not only getting Veterans into housing, but of engaging in practices to support their housing stability once they are in a new place. Respondents identified the following useful practices to support housing stability:

- Developing a formal written housing stability plan through a collaborative process between Veterans and case managers.
- Helping Veterans access furniture and other household items through furniture banks, thrift stores, and church rummage sales. Respondents viewed these resources as essential for making new housing arrangements truly liveable for Veterans.

Provision of emergency/temporary housing. In light of the overall lack of emergency shelter in rural areas, respondents reported using a range of approaches for meeting the short-term emergency housing needs of Veterans, including:

- Working with churches to provide shelter on an ad-hoc or short-term basis. One respondent noted working with a network of 50 churches who would take turns on a weekly basis to serve as a de facto emergency shelter each week.
- Working with faith-based charities, Veterans Service Organizations or other organizations who have flexible funds at their disposal to pay for a hotel/motel room or another short-term housing arrangement for a Veteran.

LEVERAGING EFFECTIVE COLLABORATION TO SERVE VETERANS IN RURAL AREAS

Respondents discussed a range of creative ways to use SSVF grants to serve Veterans in rural areas but noted that the services and temporary financial assistance available through SSVF are not always sufficient to meet the full range of needs among the unstably housed Veterans whom they served, and that such service gaps are sometimes challenging to fill in the rural context. Respondents viewed SSVF as an important resource but also understood that they would need to engage with a wide range of stakeholders to leverage appropriate resources to help them obtain and maintain stable housing. One respondent summarized the challenge as follows:

That's something that's specific in rural areas. You really have to reach out and engage your community to assist in those areas [to supplement services SSVF cannot provide]. Because we don't have a lot of the grant funding and program resources that other areas have, larger areas.

Respondents discussed the wide array of collaborations that they had developed, including efforts to engage and work with partners in the public, private, and non-profit sectors to meet the full scope of needs of Veterans experiencing housing instability. Collaborative partnerships or concerted efforts to engage stakeholders that are particularly worth highlighting include the following:

Developing new formal collaborative entities to address gaps. One respondent had collaborated with all other Veteran organizations in their area to form a new non-profit organization specifically dedicated to filling gaps in available services for Veterans. The respondent described how this new non-profit entity engaged in its own fundraising efforts and used the resulting resources as a source of flexible funds for addressing Veteran needs that might otherwise go unmet. For example, the respondent noted relying on this non-profit to pay for cell phones for Veterans, car insurance so a Veteran could get to work, or for emergency housing. The respondent viewed this non-profit entity as a critical and highly flexible resource to complement SSVF services and noted that fundraising efforts were made easier by the patriotism of the community and desire to help Veterans. (See Box 3.)

Box 3:
**Working with Partners to Create a New,
Flexible Resource to Address Service Gaps**

There are gaps in services that not every agency can handle, and that's why we made [the non-profit] to kind of close those gaps. It's volunteers, and we do fundraising . . . to be able to afford these purchases to help a Veteran. . . I think in our small community, it is very patriotic. People have more room to help Veterans. I think that's why [the non-profit] is so successful in raising funds to be able to close these gaps in services because people are willing to help us.

Engaging the broader community. A number of respondents spoke about the importance of engaging their entire community as part of their efforts to address housing instability among Veterans. Many noted that engaging the community was easier in rural areas, where social ties made residents more inclined to “take care of their own” and where it would be less likely for Veterans to “fall into the shadows.” Efforts to involve the broader community include:

- Engaging in advocacy efforts to make it known that the problem of homelessness and housing instability is very real and actually exists in the community.
- Developing and maintaining relationships with public officials, such as town clerks, mayors, controllers, and county commissioners, who may know about new opportunities for assistance.

Respondents also emphasized the importance of developing relationships with a broad network of partners across all sectors, including those in the private sector with whom they otherwise had little overlap. Partnerships that respondents described as particularly useful include:

- Entities with whom the work of SSVF naturally overlapped, such as other homeless assistance providers, public housing authorities, food and furniture banks, Veterans Services Organizations, and VA Medical Centers and Community Based Outpatient Clinics.
- State, county, and municipal programs that provide cash assistance or other services specifically to Veterans.
- Mainstream employment, rental assistance, and other providers.

- Private businesses who provided financial or in-kind help. One respondent described working with a local car dealership who would repair Veterans' vehicles and, in at least one case, had given a Veteran a car. Another mentioned working with a local bike shop who would provide Veterans with bicycles.
- Human resources departments at potential employers who assisted in developing ride-sharing arrangements so Veterans are able to get a ride to work with coworkers who live nearby.

Finally, some respondents described efforts to proactively develop new resources when they identified a gap in service availability. For example, one respondent collaborated to help build a network of lawyers in their area to provide pro-bono legal services to Veterans to assist them in applying for VA benefits or discharge upgrades.

Building relationships with landlords. Respondents overwhelmingly viewed building and maintaining positive relationships with landlords as crucial to their ability to help Veterans access stable housing and to the overall success of their SSVF program. As one respondent put it, "I think another thing that is incredibly needed is having strong landlord relationships. When you're dealing with a community that has less than 2% to 1% units available, it is those relationships that—we treat our landlords as just as important to clients as our clients." Some specific strategies that respondents described for creating good relationships with landlords included:

- Ensuring open communication with landlords and making SSVF staff easy for landlords to reach.
- Making clear the SSVF program's willingness to serve as intermediary for any tenant-related issues.
- Maintaining a detailed list of landlords that included information about the specific housing barriers (e.g., history of eviction, criminal history) facing tenants they were (and were not) willing to work with.
- Creating websites and/or program materials that were specifically targeted to landlords.
- Having a staff member who served as the program's dedicated landlord liaison.

Implications for Policy and Practice

A number of broader implications for policy and practice emerge from the interviews we conducted with SSVF grantees. These implications include:

- The need for grantees to have information about tangible, practical strategies that they can implement to address unique challenges for working in rural areas. Many existing best practices are relevant for urban areas but do not fit in the rural context. We have highlighted some potential strategies above, and additional work is needed to identify, describe, and disseminate best practices to support their implementation in rural areas.
- There is a clear need for additional resources—either from the SSVF program or from other sources—to assist Veterans who, while not meeting the official definition of literal homelessness, are experiencing acute forms of housing insecurity. While certainly present in urban areas, problems with housing adequacy and couch surfing appear to be particularly challenging in rural areas, and many respondents perceived that rural Veterans do not meet the HUD definition of literal homelessness because there is limited availability of emergency shelter in which they can stay.

- Grantees working in rural areas need to have broad expertise among their staff to serve Veterans effectively. Many noted the importance of hiring specialists to perform services (e.g., SSI/SSDI applications, Veterans benefits applications) that are otherwise unavailable in resource thin rural areas. However, SSVF (and other) resources were not always sufficient to hire staff with the full range of expertise perceived as necessary.

Finally, in addition to describing their experiences working in rural areas, respondents also shared their opinions about additional resources beyond SSVF that were needed to better serve Veterans experiencing housing instability and homelessness in rural areas. Some of the key needs that respondents identified include:

- **More emergency shelter and/or short-term housing options** to temporarily house Veterans as they transition to more stable housing. Many respondents indicated the number of HUD-VA Supportive Housing (HUD-VASH) program vouchers in their area were inadequate to meet demand, or noted that some counties they served did not have HUD-VASH vouchers available at all. Likewise, respondents described a specific need for more emergency shelter beds, particularly in counties where there are no beds available and the nearest shelter beds are at a distance. More generally, many respondents noted the overall lack of affordable, quality housing in their community as a challenge, and at least one respondent talked about the broader need for more income-based and subsidized housing.
- **Mental health services and case management for Veterans with more intensive mental health needs.** In general, respondents noted there was a need for greater access to mental health providers and other resources to support Veterans dealing with serious mental health issues impacting their ability to maintain stable housing. Some observed it would be helpful to have permanent supportive housing units for Veterans with more intensive needs for ongoing support.
- **Additional resources to address transportation challenges** in rural areas. In regions where public transportation is an option, providers said it would be helpful to have transit subsidies available. In many rural areas, there is no public transportation, and respondents indicated a need for other resources to support transportation for Veterans to get to non-medical appointments (e.g., partnering with a non-profit agency to provide rides).
- **More flexible financial resources to assist in addressing issues that may be barriers to housing** (e.g., paying off driving-related fines and fees or providing a card to help with purchasing gas so Veterans can drive to work and appointments, helping obtain and maintain a cell phone, paying for skills/vocational training).
- **Increased funding to support ability of the organization to conduct the intensive work of serving Veterans in rural areas.** Respondents observed that serving Veterans in rural areas may require more time and training on the part of staff compared with serving Veterans in urban areas. Many cited the need for increased/additional funding to hire adequate staff to provide case management for Veterans in a rural setting, to support staff time to dedicate to programs such as SOAR, and to support training of staff generally as well as in relevant specialty areas (e.g., Ready to Rent program).
- **Ability to provide comprehensive services to Veterans, including Grant and Per Diem, Homeless Veterans Reentry Program, and permanent supportive housing.** Respondents thought these programs and resources were helpful when available but noted barriers to providing them to

Veterans they served and, in some cases, wanted help applying for these resources when they were available. Finally, some respondents said it would be helpful to have support to apply for these resources when their organization lacked the expertise or had challenges with accessing data needed for a grant application.

This project sought to provide actionable information to improve services for unstably housed Veterans in rural areas. Interviews provided a broad scope of information about the problem of housing instability in rural areas and responses to it. While the current report focused on what we learned from these interviews about challenges to serving Veterans and opportunities and strategies for overcoming these challenges, future reports will summarize additional information gleaned from these interviews as well as quantitative work examining the magnitude and type of self-reported risk of homelessness among unstably housed Veterans in rural areas.

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