

Factors that Influence Homelessness in Older Homeless Veterans

BACKGROUND

While homelessness in our country affects a wide variety of people, the compounding factors associated with being an older homeless veteran deserve additional attention. Being a veteran alone increases the risk of homelessness two-fold. Additionally, over 15% of the current homeless population is 51 years or older, with the number of homeless over 65 expected to double by 2050. When compared to their younger counterparts, older adults are more likely to be separated from their loved ones (by death or otherwise), experience a decrease in social support, and suffer a variety of illnesses. When factoring in the additional stressors from homelessness, the problems associated with age may be exacerbated. Homelessness is a significant problem for veterans, especially older ones, yet planning for their unique needs has not been informed by the views of older veterans themselves nor staff who provide services to them.

THE STUDY

In order to understand the needs and challenges of older homeless veterans, researchers conducted several focus groups and semi-structured interviews with groups of veterans, VA staff liaisons, and housing intervention providers. The study was designed to further illustrate the experience of older homeless veterans, observe the way perceptions of homelessness vary across viewpoints, understand the factors associated with completing a transitional supportive housing program, and identify necessary approaches for improving access to homeless programs.

METHOD

Utilizing focus group or semi-structured interview formats, the authors conducted six sessions with older

veterans (comprising 45 male veterans age 49 or older), three sessions with VA staff members (n=14) who coordinate services to older veterans, and three sessions with direct service providers (n=10) to older homeless veterans. The veterans participating all received transitional supportive housing services from the VA Grant Per Diem (GPD) program.

RESULTS

Four major themes emerged from the Veterans focus groups. A majority of the veterans expressed extremely negative feelings regarding the homelessness experience, seeing it as both humiliating and degrading. In addition, there was an overwhelmingly agreement that the benefits of the structured transitional housing program were supportive of their desire to improve their situations. The program helped not only with providing the basic necessities, but also with maintain self-esteem. Another apparent theme was the need for age tailored job placement programs. While the veterans were grateful for the housing program, an employment program that was tailored specifically for older veterans would assist with age discrimination problems. Lastly, peer outreach was viewed as a promising approach for encouraging older veterans to access the available services offered by the VA. Improving access to services, possibly by widening entry criteria, would also help with reaching more homeless veterans.

Following focus groups and interviews with the VA staff liaisons and housing intervention providers, six themes emerged. The belief that the transitional housing program has made a positive change was felt with both the liaisons and providers. They also expressed a need for individualized criteria to address the unique needs of veterans, in addition to improved communication within the VA system so that changes could be communicated

to all staff as well as the veterans themselves. Both groups acknowledged the distinct differences between older and younger homeless veterans in terms of less social support, greater employment challenges, more significant health care needs, and more motivation to change. The VA staff liaisons and housing intervention providers also agreed that improved outreach services were necessary, potentially including broadening services and strategies; however, budget constraints within the VA were an obstacle. Permanent housing issues and the coordination of services were also major themes emerging from the focus groups and interviews. Improving staff training and education may help with managing the workload of service providers and ultimately providing better assistance to the veterans.

DISCUSSION AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Participants of the study agreed on many of the problems faced by homeless veterans as well as possible solutions. While homelessness is an overall negative experience for these veterans, appropriate empathetic response and consideration from the VA staff liaisons and housing intervention providers can help to create a more positive experience in accessing services. Additionally, improvements in outreach through media, peers, and well-trained medical social workers can help to increase access to and usage of the VA services.

Although the veterans, staff, and direct service providers were in general very positive towards the VA homelessness program, the VA needs to increase funding for transitional supportive housing programs; streamline, publicize, and improve access to services; broaden eligibility; and improve coordination of homelessness services.

As the VA continues to invest in a wider variety of coordinated services regarding health, employment, and social support, strides are being made to address some of the additional barriers for homeless older veterans.

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