



2014 LHD of the Year Award

LHD NAME: Whatcom County Health Department (Bellingham, WA)

LHD SIZE (population served): Medium (50,000–499,999)

LHD Overview

Whatcom County Health Department (WCHD) is a local county health jurisdiction serving a population of close to 210,000. Whatcom is a home-rule county with separation of powers in an executive and a legislative branch. The legislative branch consists of an elected seven-member Whatcom County Council acting also as health board to WCHD. WCHD is located in the beautiful far northwestern corner of the state of Washington, with British Columbia as its northern neighbor. This creates some unique opportunities for international partnering with its Canadian neighbor, such as cross-border partnering on health and emergency preparedness during the 2010 Vancouver Winter Olympics. Whatcom County has an interesting urban/rural mix, with Bellingham being home to some 81,000 residents. Bellingham recently ranked number seven in the Gallup-Healthways Well-Being Index of America's 10 healthiest cities. Two tribal governments are contained within the county's borders—the Lummi Nation and the Nooksack Indian Tribe. Neither has a tribal health department. WCHD's annual budget was \$18,792,489 in 2013 and it has 72.35 full-time employees. WCHD has four divisions: Communicable Disease and Epidemiology, Community Health, Environmental Health, and Human Services. It has applied for Public Health Accreditation Board accreditation and has a site visit scheduled for June 2014.

Statement for LHD of the Year Award: External Policy

Veterans' homelessness is an issue that plagues the entire nation and Whatcom County is no exception. Although flawless counts are impossible to come by—the transient nature of homeless populations presents a major difficulty—the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) estimates that 57,849 veterans are homeless on any given night.

The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) states that the nation's homeless veterans are predominantly male; roughly eight percent are female. Most are single, live in urban areas, and suffer from mental illness, alcohol and/or substance abuse, or co-occurring disorders. Veterans comprise about 12 percent of the adult homeless population.

In addition to the complex set of factors influencing all homelessness—extreme shortages of affordable housing, livable incomes, and access to healthcare—a large number of displaced and at-risk veterans live with lingering effects of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and substance abuse, which are compounded by a lack of family and social support networks. Additionally, military occupations and

training are not always transferable to the civilian workforce, placing some veterans at a disadvantage when competing for employment.

The 2008 local Point in Time (PIT) Count indicated that at least 83 veterans were homeless in Whatcom County. These numbers remained stable through 2011. During a 2011 community needs assessment, Whatcom County recognized the disgrace of veterans' homelessness and made a commitment to house its local heroes. The county determined that the top priority for homeless veterans was safe, secure housing that would bring critical supportive services with it. Whatcom County had the challenge of implementing sweeping change through policy enactment and subsequent action to end veterans' homelessness in Whatcom County.

Goals

WCHD's goal was to end local veterans' homelessness through a commitment of funding and an expansion of veterans' programs and services. This goal was launched with the proposal of a new county ordinance in 2011. This ordinance officially created the Whatcom County Veterans Assistance Program funded primarily with local property tax dollars. Once the County Council approved the ordinance, the County Code was enacted, allowing the tax dollars to fund a variety of vital services. It was clear to the health department that providing a place to live was not enough to ensure a stable and productive life for veterans who had been homeless for some time. WCHD knew that it had to offer support services to ensure a return to health and an opportunity to build independent living skills. These services include behavioral health treatment, dental care, transportation to essential appointments, and legal assistance.

Implementation

In order to measure its success, WCHD used a software system, HMIS, (Homeless Management Information System) to collect data. It collected and analyzed information on demographics, successful placements into housing, and retention and stability in that housing. It even tracked how long veterans had to wait for housing once they were welcomed into our program.

The annual Whatcom County PIT Count was another method WCHD used to track its success. The PIT assists the health department with objective measures, is very well regulated and monitored, and provides a valid and replicable measure of homelessness in Whatcom County.

WCHD began to track its accomplishments of housing homeless veterans and connecting them to critical health and behavioral healthcare and the necessary supportive services to ensure their ascension to contributory citizenship. The health department counted how many veterans it housed and how many of them received the key services they required to remain successful in their new homes.

The enactment of a new County Code creating the Veterans Assistance Program initiated the drive to end veterans' homelessness. Whatcom County Ordinance 2011-033 formally established the Whatcom County Veterans Assistance Program. The ordinance was written pursuant to Washington state statute RCW 73.08.010. The ordinance called for a significant expansion of services to veterans, including housing eviction prevention assistance, housing assistance for homeless veterans, behavioral health services not paid for by other sources, training opportunities, case management services, and numerous

other supportive services to provide a comprehensive continuum of care. Local property tax millage dedicated only to this purpose could now be used more completely.

Through contract, the county funds the Whatcom Homeless Service Center (WHSC), a division of the County's Community Action Agency (The Opportunity Council). It serves as the single point of entry for homeless housing services in Whatcom County. The county committed funds to this agency for housing veterans and leveraged federal veterans' housing programs. The partnership with the Opportunity Council/WHSC helped to attract 35 Veterans Administration Subsidized Housing (HUD-VASH) Vouchers along with case management.

In 2012, the Opportunity Council became one of the first 33 grantees of the VA's Supportive Services for Veterans' Families (SSVF) Grant. The Opportunity Council obtained this grant, bringing in additional monies, in part through the promise of matching dollars from the local Veterans Assistance Program. The county tax dollars combined with these two additional federal sources to provide a solid funding foundation for efforts to end Veterans' homelessness.

WCHD also partnered with numerous community social service agencies to provide supportive services for veterans who were being housed. The County Veterans Assistance Program acts as the hub for resources such as counseling, temporary financial assistance, housing assistance, health services, compensation and pension, social service programs, legal assistance, employment assistance, and transportation.

The health department is able to offer services to veterans through its partnerships in the local community: Healthcare through the Whatcom Alliance for Health Advancement, the Bellingham Vet Center, and the VA Community Based Outreach Clinic. Veteran Service Group partners include the American Legion, Disabled American Veterans, Veterans of Foreign Wars, Vietnam Veterans of America, Combat Veterans International, Veterans for Peace, and Growing Veterans. A Work Source veterans' representative partners with the WCHD on employment services. Other partners include the partially county-funded Disabled American Veterans' Van to Seattle Hospital and the County Veteran Transportation Program Contract with the Whatcom Volunteer Center.

In partnership with the community, WCHD made significant progress in ending veteran homelessness by establishing a strategic plan and funding the effort with sufficient local dollars, which in turn leveraged additional federal monies. These dollars enhanced the existing continuum of care to such a great extent that rental assistance and supportive services could be brought to identify veterans sufficient to impact positive change. WCHD purposefully used its community partnerships in this rewarding work to ensure wide investment and the best possibility for sustained success.

Outcomes

Through the implementation of Ordinance 2011-033 and targeted housing dollars, the PIT Count demonstrated that the number of homeless veterans in Whatcom County dropped from 74 in 2011 to 28 in 2012. The number of homeless veterans has decreased by 65 percent from 2008 (the first year of the count) to 2014 (the current year.) Only three veterans who were counted in 2013 remained unhoused in 2014.

Numbers only paint a small part of the picture. It is important to remember each of the veterans represented in the PIT are individuals with unique needs and desires. (Note: The following names have been changed to protect privacy)

John was one of the very first veterans to enter the doors of the Veterans Assistance Program. A friend of John's had read about the program and encouraged him to check it out. John served two combat tours in Vietnam. Disillusioned with the United States, John moved overseas after his time in the service. He returned to the United States and started a family but struggled to reintegrate into the American way of life. After his divorce, things rapidly deteriorated for John and he found himself living on National Forest land in eastern Whatcom County.

John professed skepticism that the program would be able to help him, but he was willing to give the program his trust. John was housed through the Supportive Services for Veterans Families grant and the Veterans Assistance Program. Disabled American Veterans, which is intentionally co-located with the Veterans Assistance Program, were able to file a VA disability benefits claim for John that has resulted in compensation benefits that he is able to live on. John is a talented artist and now teaches art therapy classes and has had several successful gallery showings of his art. John desired to give back to the community and now takes an active role in shaping housing policy as a member of the Whatcom County Housing Advisory Committee.

Chad struggled for most of his life. He was separated from the military early due to behavioral challenges stemming from mental health disabilities. Chad also struggled with substance abuse. He had spent his adult life in and out of the corrections system. Chad was sleeping in a homeless camp and panhandling at a grocery store. Through the program, Chad has been housed with the help of both the Veterans Affairs Subsidized Housing Program and the Supportive Services for Veterans Families Grant. A County contract with the Whatcom Alliance for Health Achievement was able to purchase him dentures. Local county dollars funded his drug rehabilitation program. He has been linked up with the Department of Social and Health Services and now receives food and cash benefits. He is also receiving his health benefits through the VA. Chad has been clean and sober since moving into housing. Chad is very proud of his new smile and stops by to show it off.

It is clear that WCHD's dedicated commitment to ending veteran homelessness in its county produced significant success.

Advice

Whatcom County Health Department would recommend that any other LHD attempting to implement this model use well researched best practices, such as Housing First, logical and sustainable policies, and partnership with other community organizations for maximum impact. Current research on the Housing First approach can be found in the article *Housing Chronically Homeless Veterans: Evaluating the Efficacy of a Housing First Approach to HUD-VASH* by Dennis P. Culhane at http://works.bepress.com/dennis_culhane/127.

WCHD has been successful because it partnered with local and federal entities along with non-profits, veterans groups, charities, and religious-based organizations to provide wraparound services for

veterans. These wraparound services and community-focused care enable the health department to provide replicable and sustainable services for veterans. WCHD use one point of entry to access all homeless benefits (The Whatcom Homeless Service Center) and another single point of entry for all veteran-based wraparound services (The Whatcom County Veterans Assistance Program). These two agencies work closely together and network with other providers to offer robust services to veterans. Specifically, providers from the Whatcom Homeless Service Center and the Veterans Assistance Program meet on a weekly basis to discuss cases and network solutions.

By leveraging local tax dollars (The Veterans Assistance Fund per RCW 73.08.080), WCHD was able to bring in the Federal Supportive Services for Veterans Grant. This blending of funding enables the health department to be a regional leader in veterans housing. Blended funds allow it to exponentially expand services for veterans and continue to serve veterans for the foreseeable future.

In addition, by partnering with the Whatcom Homeless Service Center, WCHD has been able to target eligible chronically homeless veterans and to build relationships with landlords in the community in order to house some of its most challenged individuals.

This program strongly encourages enacting sound policy based on data and best practices and emphasizes LHD leadership and community collaboration focused on a priority valued by all.

Supporting Materials

[Whatcom County Ordinance #2011-033](#)