

Vouchers: Veterans Affairs Supportive Housing Vouchers

By John Driscoll, President and CEO, National Coalition for Homeless Veterans

Administering agency: HUD's Office of Public and Indian Housing (PIH), and the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA)

Year program started: Formally in 1992; most active since 2008

Number of persons/households served: 62,000 veterans housed

Population targeted: Homeless veterans meeting VA health care needs criteria

FY14 funding: \$75 million

See also: *Housing Choice Voucher Program, Veterans Housing, Homeless Assistance Programs, Interagency Council on Homelessness*

The HUD-Veterans Affairs Supportive Housing Program (HUD-VASH) combines Housing Choice Voucher rental assistance for homeless veterans with case management and clinical services provided by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). It is a key program in the Administration's stated goal of ending veteran homelessness within 5 years, by 2015.

Since 2007, Congress has appropriated funds for approximately 58,000 VASH vouchers, approximately 10,000 per year. At the time of this writing, another 10,000 vouchers have been approved for FY14, bringing the total to 68,000, but those have not yet been allocated. Originally intended to provide permanent supportive housing for chronically homeless veterans, VA and local service providers have identified low income single veterans with dependent children as a high priority for this vital assistance.

ADMINISTRATION

The HUD-VASH program is jointly administered by the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and HUD's Office of Public and Indian Housing (PIH). Because the vouchers are allocated to local public housing agencies (PHAs) and the nearest VA medical center (VAMC), program administration is largely devolved to community.

HISTORY

Although the HUD-VASH program was originally created in the early 1990s, it did not receive strong federal support for many years. In 2007, as soldiers began returning home from Iraq and Afghanistan to a troubled U.S. economy, Congress demonstrated strong interest in preventing and reducing homelessness among this population. Congress began funding these special purpose vouchers in earnest in the FY08 HUD Appropriations Act with an allocation of \$75 million for approximately 10,000 vouchers. The Obama Administration announced in late 2009 that it was setting a goal of ending homelessness among veterans within five years, and VASH became an important tool for achieving this goal. Since FY08, Congress has allocated the same \$75 million to HUD for approximately 10,000 new vouchers each year with the only exception being the FY11 appropriations act; \$50 million was awarded in FY11 for approximately 7,500 vouchers in the continuing resolution that year.

Advocates originally identified approximately 60,000 chronically homeless veterans who could have their homelessness ended with a HUD-VASH voucher and encouraged Congress and the Administration to set this as a target for the number of vouchers on the street. Initial voucher allocation was not geared towards chronically homeless veterans, however, and only in the past two years have HUD and the VA become more successful in encouraging communities to target vouchers more deeply. At the same time, due to an overall shortage of affordable housing and scarce rental assistance for homeless veterans through other programs, many communities chose to award VASH vouchers to homeless veterans who were not chronically homeless. In the coming years, Congress and the Administration along with interested community partners and homeless advocates will need to reassess what resources are needed to end homelessness for both the chronically homeless as well as other homeless veterans. Improved planning and coordination at the local level will be key to success.

PROGRAM SUMMARY

In December 2013, HUD and the VA jointly announced that national report data showed that veteran homelessness declined by 7.6% between January 2012 and January 2013, and has declined by 24% since 2009 despite high unemployment and a challenging economy. According to the 2013 Point in Time count (Part I of the 2013 Annual Homeless Assessment Report), 57,849 veterans were homeless in the United States on a single night in January 2013. In addition, a disproportionate number of homeless persons are veterans as compared to prevalence of veterans among the overall U.S. population.

Although several federal programs are available to help meet the housing and services needs of homeless persons, HUD-VASH is a particularly effective resource because it combines both housing and services into one resource.

Generally, the program is administered in accordance with regular Housing Choice Voucher program requirements. However, Congress allows HUD to waive or specify alternative requirements for any provision of any statute or regulation that HUD administers in connection with this program in order to effectively deliver and administer HUD-VASH voucher assistance. The HUD-VASH Operating Requirements, including the waivers and alternative requirements from voucher program rules, were published in the Federal Register on May 6, 2008.

Notable waivers in the Operating Requirements include:

- Section 8(o)(19) of the United States Housing Act of 1937 is waived. It would otherwise require homeless veterans to have chronic mental illnesses or chronic substance use disorders with required treatment of these disorders as a condition of receipt of HUD-VASH assistance.
- The VAMC will refer HUD-VASH eligible families to the PHA for the issuance of vouchers. Therefore, the PHA will not have the authority to maintain a waiting list or apply local preferences for HUD-VASH vouchers. Accordingly, section 8(o)(6)(A) of the USHA of 1937, 42 U.S.C. 1437f(o)(6)(A), in regard to preferences, has been waived to provide for the effective administration of the program.
- Federal regulations relating to applicant selection from the waiting list and local preferences are also waived. Regulations regarding special admissions, cross-listing of the waiting list, and opening and closing the waiting list do not apply to the HUD-VASH program.
- The VAMC will screen all families in accordance with its screening criteria. By agreeing to administer the HUD-VASH program, the PHA relinquishes its authority to determine the eligibility of families in accordance with regular HCV program rules and PHA policies. Specifically, under the HUD-VASH program, PHAs will not have the authority to screen potentially eligible families or deny assistance for any grounds permitted under 24 CFR 982.552, broad denial for violations of voucher program requirements, and 982.553, specific denial for criminals and alcohol abusers, with one exception. PHAs will still be required to prohibit admission if any member of the household is subject to a lifetime registration requirement under a state sex offender registration program.

Eligible Participants. In addition to income level and Lifetime Sexual Offender Registry status factors, in order to receive a housing voucher through this program, participants must meet the following criteria:

- Be a VA health care-eligible veteran.
- Meet the McKinney act definition of homelessness.
- Be in need of case management services, including services for serious mental illness, a substance use disorder history, or a physical disability. Case management is a requirement for participation in the HUD-VASH voucher program.

Allocation of Vouchers. The program distributes vouchers among VAMCs and corresponding PHAs that participate in the program. There is at least one site in each of the 50 states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico. In order to determine the allocation of vouchers, the VA and HUD take into account the following factors:

- The population of homeless veterans needing services in the area;
- The number of homeless veterans served by the homeless programs at each VAMC;
- Geographic distribution; and,
- VA case management resources.

Portability. An eligible family issued a HUD-VASH voucher must receive case management services provided by the VAMC. Therefore, special mobility and portability procedures have been established. HUD-VASH participant families may reside only in those jurisdictional areas that are accessible to case management services as determined by the partnering VAMC. More information regarding portability features of VASH vouchers can be found in the HUD-VASH Operating Guidelines.

Project-basing VASH vouchers. PHAs may designate a portion of their total HUD-VASH allocation as project-based vouchers. Project-based proposals apply to all types of developments including existing units, newly constructed units, and substantially rehabilitated units. Requests for project basing will only be considered if the local VAMC supports the request. The initial lease term must be at least one year. If a household chooses to move from a project-based unit, the PHA must offer the household the opportunity for continued tenant-based rental assistance in the form of either assistance under the voucher program or other comparable tenant-based rental assistance. If there is no regular voucher to offer the household, the tenant keeps its HUD-VASH voucher when moving to another unit.

FUNDING

HUD-VASH vouchers are funded by both the VA and HUD. On the VA side, case management services are funded through the VA's Health Account and do not have a separate line item in the budget. Because this account funds all VA health care activities it is generally robustly funded by Congress and thus has not been an issue on which advocates have needed to focus. On the HUD side, \$75 million was provided for 10,000 new vouchers in FY08, FY09, FY10, FY12, and FY13. In FY11, \$50 million was provided for approximately 7,500 vouchers. VASH voucher renewals are lumped into the general Section 8 tenant-based rental assistance account, and Congress has provided sufficient funding in recent years to renew all VASH vouchers.

The Administration's budget proposal for FY15 seeks \$75 million, which would enable an additional 10,000 homeless veterans to be served. The Administration will seek a legislative amendment to allow high capacity Indian tribes and tribally designated housing entities (TDHEs) to administer HUD-VASH assistance.

FORECAST FOR 2014

HUD-VASH vouchers are an incredibly important resource in ending the national tragedy of veterans' homelessness. Congress should continue to fund HUD with \$75 million to provide 10,000 new VASH vouchers in FY14 and FY15, and provide adequate funding in the tenant-based Section 8 account to renew all existing VASH vouchers.

TIPS FOR LOCAL SUCCESS

While any form of homelessness in America is shameful, politicians have been particularly responsive to wanting to end veterans' homelessness. For those policymakers whom advocates have found difficult to approach for support on more broad affordable housing and homelessness issues, advocates may find success in discussing the need for resources to end veterans' homelessness. Data regarding the prevalence of homeless veterans is available in HUD's Annual Homeless Assessment Report, Veterans Supplement, through the U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness, or from the National Alliance to End Homelessness.

WHAT TO SAY TO LEGISLATORS

Advocates should speak to Senators and Representatives, particularly if they are on the Appropriations or Veterans Affairs Committees, and urge them to provide \$75 million for 10,000 new HUD-VASH vouchers to

help end homelessness among veterans, while full-funding all existing vouchers through the regular Section 8 account.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

National Coalition for Homeless Veterans, 202-546-1969, www.nchv.org

Corporation for Supportive Housing, 212-986-2966, www.csh.org

National Alliance to End Homelessness, 202-638-1526, www.endhomelessness.org

National Low Income Housing Coalition, 202-662-1530, www.nlihc.org

HUD's HUD-VASH Webpage: <http://1.usa.gov/AgrU2z>