Ending Veteran Homelessness on Long Island

By Ralph Fasano, MEd, CRC
Executive Director
Concern for Independent Living

In 2011 President Obama, Department of Defense Secretary Eric Shinseki and HUD Secretary Shaun Donovan announced a five year plan to end veteran homelessness in the United States. The announcement was backed up by record funds to help achieve this goal. VASH vouchers (Veterans Administration Supportive Housing) were made available to serve as a rental subsidy for veterans so that they could afford housing. Case managers were assigned to the veterans to help them find the housing and services needed to remain housed. SSVF (Supportive Services for Veteran Families) were distributed in an effort to prevent veterans from becoming homeless. Halfway into this plan the results have been significant. Veteran homelessness has been reduced by 17.2 percent.

Earlier this year Concern for Independent Living together with the Long Island Coalition for Homeless, United Veterans Beacon House, The Community Development Corporation of Long Island, Suffolk County United Veterans and the Northport Veterans Administration took part in a “Boot Camp.” Six different regions from across the country came together to strategize on developing a plan to end veteran homelessness by December, 2015. We received training from the Rapid Results Institute and the 100,000 Homes Campaign. After three long days we came up with the Long Island Plan which is currently in the implementation stage.

The essence of the plan is simple. If you can house more people every month than the number of people who become homeless you can reduce the number of homeless by that number every month until no one remains homeless. Efforts can then focus on rapid re-housing to house any veterans who become homeless. Prevention activities are also key.

The creation of permanent affordable housing with flexible services is an important component of our plan. Concern is currently in the process of developing 60 units in Amityville and 59 units in Ronkonkoma. All of the units in Amityville will serve homeless veterans and their families. About half of the units in Ronkonkoma are for homeless veterans with the balance aimed at housing veterans who need affordable housing. Capital funding from the New York State Office of Mental Health, NYS Homes and Community Renewal, NYS Homeless Housing Assistance program, The Federal Home Loan Bank of New York and Suffolk County made this housing possible.

Concern has been working with the Northport VA, CDC of Long Island and United Veterans Beacon House to house homeless veterans who are given VASH vouchers. To date we have housed 47 veterans in permanent housing. Supportive services ensure that the veterans’ needs are met. Two of the veterans have secured jobs through the “Campus Is Home” program to pay their rent. Others are in the process of receiving training that will help them get competitive employment. He has successfully graduated from the supported housing apartment program, but continues to utilize Career Services as an alumnus.

Chad is deaf, and was able to work with a career counselor while he was living in one of the East House halfway house programs. Chad began working with his career counselor while he was living in one of the East House halfway house programs. Chad is deaf, and was able to work with a career counselor who is a sign language interpreter. He completed the halfway

Integrating Vocational Rehabilitation with Housing Support

By Donna Marcello, BA, CASAC
Career Services Program Director
East House, Rochester, New York

Entering a residential program for substance use can be very scary, a time filled with questions and learning to navigate the unknown. As service providers, we can make this time a little easier by answering questions, offering assistance, reassuring clients that all of their needs will be met. We can explain that the goal is not just to provide a bed to sleep in, but to help the individual to achieve sobriety, better physical health, improved mental health, economic self-sufficiency and independence. This is how we approach new clients at East House. And to make sure that all of their needs are met, East House makes vocational rehabilitation a priority.

Almost 25 years ago, East House realized the importance of providing education and employment services to complement its existing residential programs for individuals in recovery from mental illness and substance use disorder. So in 1989, it launched a program, now known as Career Services, to target the vocational and education needs of its clients. Over those 25 years, we have seen the importance of meaningful activity to the rehabilitation of the individuals who we serve. Currently, the Career Services program serves over 700 people annually in recovery from substance use disorder. These individuals come from East House’s four OASAS-licensed halfway houses and one supported housing apartment program, one of three other OASAS-licensed residential treatment programs in Rochester, NY that contract with East House for these services.

Counselors from Career Services are considered part of the team that serves clients. They work closely with house managers and counselors to ensure that education and employment services are addressed as part of the plan for clients. Every client residing in an OASAS-licensed facility is given an orientation to the Career Services program, and there is an expectation of involvement while the client is at East House. While we believe in the importance of involvement, we also believe in personal choice. So each client works on an individualized plan with his or her career counselor, choosing what services and goals are important to each of them.

Here’s how it works: career counselors are assigned to each OASAS-licensed facility, allowing each program to have a point-person for vocational and education services and ensuring optimum collaboration between residential and vocational staff. As part of their assignment, career counselors attend community meetings at the halfway houses, as well as treatment team meetings and case reviews. Career counselors review client progress with residential and treatment staff on a regular basis to ensure that progress is consistent across programs. Depending on the client, the focus may be education, employment or both.

For example, clients have the opportunity to take classes to prepare for the TASC exam (Test Assessing Secondary Completion), formerly known as GED, at the East House Paul Wolk Learning Center, which is located at Career Services. In addition to TASC preparation, Career Services also offers adult basic education in math and reading as well as classes focused on computer skills, which are essential in today’s job market. For those in need of assistance with memory, focus, or concentration, Career Services offers a cognitive remediation program called NEAR (Neuropsychological Educational Approaches to Remediation). NEAR is an evidence-based approach to cognitive remediation and has been successfully implemented in some outpatient and inpatient programs. NEAR classes are held in the East House Career Services computer labs and individuals have reported excellent gains following their 15-week course.

One client who completed NEAR is Dan. Dan was residing at an East House computer lab and Individual has reported excellent gains following their 15-week course.

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Another veteran celebrated his 42nd birthday this month with his 16 year old daughter in his two-bedroom condo that he rents through HUD VASH. His daughter attends high school and she is doing well in school for the first time in years. He began a self-designed weight loss plan in November, has lost 15 pounds, and recently decided to start using the gym at his condo complex to get back into shape. He has been adding “decorative touches” – artificial flower arrangements, framed pictures, candles, and a blue and white runner for his dining room table – to his new home for the last month. He’s saving for a washer and dryer; a car for his daughter is next. He planned and enjoyed cooking holiday meals at Thanksgiving and Christmas time, and served his Concern case manager his “special” brewed tea on Christmas Eve. Despite suffering from severe anxiety, he is happy, feels secure and safe in his home and is starting to venture out to public places after being a virtual hermit for several years. He has recently begun receiving financial compensation from the VA for his service-related disabilities, and combined with his social security disability benefits earned during all the years he worked as a truck driver, he has a monthly income sufficient for his needs.

Ending Veteran homelessness on Long Island will take a concerted effort using all of the resources available in the best manner possible. We are determined to work with our partners to help make this happen.

Photos Below:

Photo #1: 60 units of housing for homeless veterans in Amityville will open in mid-2014.

Photo #2: In cases where finding rental housing for veterans with VASH vouchers proved difficult, Concern purchased sites and is renting them to the veterans.

Photo #3: Adjacent to the 60 units of housing that Concern is developing will be a large Community Center where a number of non profits will provide support services to homeless veterans.

1-844-ONE-CALL offers clients a toll-free, quick, efficient way to learn about our services and schedule appointments for individual, group, family, or couples therapy and psychiatric services.

JBFCS offers evidence-based therapies for most mental health and behavioral issues, including trauma. Services are available in many languages. We welcome referrals. Visit us at jbfcs.org.

JBFCS has Article 31 mental health clinics, plus additional satellite locations, across the five boroughs:

**BRONX**

J.W. Beatman Counseling Center  
521 West 239th St.  
Riverdale, NY 10463

Harry Blumenfeld Counseling Center  
750 Astor Ave.  
Bronx, NY 10467

Bronx R.E.A.L. Center  
55 Westchester Sq.  
Bronx, NY 10461

**BROOKLYN**

Bay Ridge Counseling Center  
9435 Ridge Blvd.  
Brooklyn, NY 11209

Boro Park Counseling Center  
1273 53rd St.  
Brooklyn, NY 11219

Break-Free Adolescent Services  
2020 Coney Island Ave.  
Brooklyn, NY 11223

Coney Island Center  
2928 West 36th St.  
Brooklyn, NY 11224

Crown Heights Counseling Center  
1055 St. Johns Place  
Brooklyn, NY 11213

**MANHATTAN**

Child Development Center  
34 West 139th St.  
New York, NY 10037

Dr. Eugene D. Glynn Manhattan North Counseling Center  
5030 Broadway, Suite 201  
New York, NY 10037

Greenberg Manhattan West Counseling Center  
135 West 50th St., 6th Floor  
New York, NY 10033

**QUEENS**

Pride of Judea Community Services  
243-02 Northern Blvd.  
Douglaston, NY 11362

**STATEN ISLAND**

Morris L. Black Counseling Center  
2795 Richmond Ave.  
Staten Island, NY 10314