

Providing Public Employment Services to Veterans Experiencing Homelessness: Gaps and Opportunities

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Over the past few decades, public workforce programs in the United States have become more focused on the needs of people with multiple employment barriers (Eyster and Nightingale 2017). The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) of 2014 continued an emphasis on services for veterans and unemployed populations and further expanded the focus on services for people with other barriers to employment, including those with disabilities and experiencing homelessness (U.S. Department of Labor 2016b; Eyster and Nightingale 2017). It is particularly important, therefore, to study how populations facing multiple employment barriers, such as homeless veterans, experience public employment services.

Veterans experiencing homelessness can enroll in the Homeless Veterans' Reintegration Program (HVRP), an employment program administered by the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL) (see Box 1). This brief uses implementation study data from the HVRP Evaluation to discuss four main areas of HVRP with potential gaps and opportunities for improvement. The four areas, which emerged from an analysis of qualitative and grantee survey data, are (1) coordination with other public workforce development programs, (2) expansion of HVRP eligibility to other veterans, (3) emphasis on veterans' skills and interests for employment opportunities, and (4) coordination with the homeless response system. Additional details about the HVRP Evaluation are in Box 1.¹

Coordination with other public workforce development programs

To make the most of employment and training services available through the public workforce system, the Veterans' Employment and Training Service within DOL requires HVRP grantees to co-enroll participants in a program at an American Job Center (AJC) (DOL 2016a). In addition to the WIOA Adult and Dislocated Worker Programs and the Wagner-Peyser Employment Service, HVRP participants can co-enroll at the AJC in services provided by the Jobs for Veterans State Grants (JVSG)² (see Box 2 for a description of the key employment services available at the AJC).³ The HVRP Evaluation's implementation study found that HVRP grantees were largely complying with the requirement (Batko et

¹ The research method used had two limitations. First, the findings presented in this brief are limited in their generalizability to a broader set of HVRP veterans or to other contexts. The study team can only report what was described by the grantee and partner staff who were interviewed from the eight grantees selected for the implementation study. Second, these interviews started in November 2020, eight months after the March 2020 start of the COVID-19 pandemic, and ended in February 2021. Thus, the data reflect the experiences of grantees and program partners amid the challenges of this time.

² JVSG is authorized under Title 38, United States Code, Section 4102A (b) 5 (38 U.S.C. §4102A(b)5). Funding for most state workforce agencies is determined by a ratio reflecting the total number of resident veterans seeking employment in that state to the total number of veterans seeking employment in all states.

³ Although not a focus of this discussion, the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs also provides employment services to veterans through programs such as Veterans Readiness and Employment and Compensated Work Therapy.

Box 1. About the HVRP Evaluation

Authorized by the Stewart B. McKinney Homeless Assistance Act in 1987, the Homeless Veterans' Reintegration Program (HVRP) is the only federally funded program focused exclusively on providing employment services to veterans experiencing homelessness. HVRP grantees can be state, local, or tribal governments; local workforce investment boards; or profit or nonprofit organizations. They receive three-year grants, although the second and third years of the grant are awarded based on performance and available funds. In program year 2020, the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL) awarded 157 HVRP grants (U.S. Department of Labor 2020).

This issue brief is one in a series of briefs that presents findings from the HVRP Evaluation, which is being conducted for DOL's Chief Evaluation Office, in collaboration with DOL's Veterans' Employment and Training Service. To assess HVRP's impact on employment outcomes, the evaluation consists of two studies: (1) a quasi-experimental impact study using administrative data and (2) a complementary implementation study.

The implementation study, which provided data for this brief, included two data collection activities: (1) a survey of all grantees from program year 2020 and (2) site visits to eight HVRP grantee communities that were deliberately selected to inform the impact study. The survey was administered from October 2020 to January 2021 and 147 grantees (94 percent) took part. The site visit communities were limited to those where the HVRP grantee operated in a state participating in the impact study and had listed an American Job Center as a partner agency in their grant application. Site visit grantees were selected to reflect geographic and urban-rural diversity. The site visits, which were conducted virtually from November 2020 through September 2021, included key informant interviews with grantee staff and their program partners reflecting housing, employment, and health sectors as well as in-depth interviews with 54 veterans who received services from one of the eight selected grantees. More information about the implementation study is in Batko et al. (2022).

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al. 2022). For example, in the grantee survey, 56 percent of grantees reported that a majority of their grantees co-enrolled in JVSG, 30 percent reported that a majority co-enrolled in the Wagner-Peyser Employment Service, and 13 percent reported that a majority co-enrolled in the WIOA Adult and Dislocated Worker Programs. In the eight site visit communities, grantee informants reported that the Disabled Veterans' Outreach Program (DVOP) specialist at the AJC typically screened veterans for employment needs and eligibility for services. The DVOP specialist would then determine which other programs, including WIOA and the Wagner-Peyser Employment Service, would be appropriate for those veterans.

HVRP grantee informants from the site visits reported collaborating with AJC partners to provide job training and development or to help veterans find appropriate jobs matching their skills and interests. One of the main strategies they reported using was pooling resources from multiple programs to ensure that veterans had access to needed services. Informants from two communities reported using funds from both HVRP and WIOA to cover training costs for participants, while three others reported contributing funding for specific portions of the service package (such as tuition, supportive services, clothing, and work boots)

with other partners. In one community, the AJC partners typically provided resume-writing services and access to a state-supported job search engine, whereas the HVRP grantee focused on job development.⁴



Box 2. Key employment services for veterans experiencing homelessness offered at American Job Centers

1. **Adult and Dislocated Worker Programs (Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act [WIOA] Title I):** Administered by the Employment and Training Administration (ETA) within the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL), the WIOA Adult Program provides individualized career and training services, prioritizing people with low incomes and who lack basic skills. The WIOA Dislocated Worker Program helps workers dislocated by job loss or transitions in economic sectors overcome barriers to employment and find new job opportunities.
2. **Wagner-Peyser Employment Service (WIOA Title III):** Administered by ETA, the Employment Service offers job seekers assistance with job searches, job referrals, and job placement. It supports employers by developing job order requirements, organizing job fairs, and helping match job seekers with jobs requiring their skills.
3. **Jobs for Veterans State Grants (JVSG):** Administered by DOL's Veterans' Employment and Training Service, JVSG allocates grants to states that fund three staff positions for veterans at American Job Centers:
 - Disabled Veterans' Outreach Program (DVOP) specialists provide case management and other employment assistance to eligible veterans. They focus on serving veterans with disabilities and other veterans facing barriers to employment, including homelessness.
 - Local Veterans' Employment Representatives (LVERs) conduct outreach to employers on behalf of veteran customers and work with DVOP specialists and other AJC staff to help veterans find employment.
 - Consolidated DVOP/LVER Position staff perform both the duties of a DVOP specialist and a LVER.

Sources: Jobs for Veterans State Grants. Available at <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/vets/programs/grants/state/jvsg>; Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act. Available at <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/eta/wioa>.

Site visit informants from a group of five communities noted that HVRP provided employment-related services that were also available from the AJC, such as assisting with resumes and job applications, providing or funding training and education, and connecting veterans with potential employers. However, although AJCs and HVRP provided similar services, these informants observed that these programs complemented one another. For example, informants from two communities perceived that access to the jobs database from the state employment agency encouraged faster employment among veterans. In another community, an AJC informant noted that a veteran might seek training in a specific area or be interested in working for a specific employer. In that situation, the AJC or HVRP might have a more suitable training program or employer connection to assist the veteran, and they would communicate with each other to determine the best way to proceed. A DVOP specialist from an additional community echoed this sentiment, explaining that they discussed with HVRP staff which program could best serve a veteran. Lastly, two HVRP grantees referred veterans to employment specialists from multiple agencies

⁴ Job development has been defined as workforce development activities whereby “staff identify job opportunities and match employer and participant interests, needs, skills, and experience” (Urban Institute 2022). Staff use multiple means to identify job opportunities, such as reviewing listings of publicly available job openings, joining employer networks or associations, cold calling potential employer partners, or relying on existing employer relationships to find out about opportunities (Urban Institute 2022).

(as one informant described it, “a double dose of employment services”), because case managers often emphasized different programing elements. A Local Veterans’ Employment Representative (LVER) from one community reinforced this point: “You can never have too many people looking out for you when it comes to [employment].”

Still, informants from four communities indicated that aspects of the relationship between the HVRP and AJC-based programs did not work as intended. HVRP grantees from three communities said they were somewhat dissatisfied with the ability of the AJCs with which they were working to find relevant employment for their program participants. An HVRP informant from one community said it was very difficult to establish communication with AJC partners, and another said that the AJC representatives to whom they referred HVRP participants did not follow up promptly with the participants. Generally, the examples of partnership difficulties described above came from communities where HVRP grantees were not co-located at an AJC or were not within an easy walk of the AJC.

Opportunity for improved service coordination through co-location. Co-location can promote functionally aligned or hybrid staffing models for service delivery, regular meetings between program staff, and strengthened referral processes (Koller and Paprocki 2015). Therefore, co-locating HVRP services at AJCs or having them geographically close to AJCs holds promise as an approach to better integrate services between workforce development partners, potentially resulting in improved service delivery for veterans experiencing homelessness. In the three communities that noted a close collaboration between AJC partners and HVRP grantees, informants reported that this collaboration was fostered by physical proximity that enabled staff from multiple programs to communicate effectively and create integrated service packages for veterans (a “one stop approach”). In at least two of the three cases, the decision to co-locate was made easier by the type of location (a densely populated urban area). In addition, the decision to co-locate in these two cases was a part of a larger plan to provide integrated workforce development services, as one DVOP explained:

“[Our center] is leading the integrated services model to make sure that everything is in place in one location to help people. Our staff are now trained to handle all types of situations so that clients aren’t getting shuffled to new people all of the time. There has been a lot of training on [our] professional development council to reach this point. It’s been paying off with our customers.”

Expansion of HVRP eligibility to other veterans who could benefit from services

To be eligible for HVRP, veterans must have an other-than-dishonorable discharge from the military and be at risk of homelessness.⁵ To prove that they had an other-than-dishonorable discharge, veterans must obtain a DD214 form, the documentation from the U.S. Department of Defense certifying an individual’s discharge from active duty, or other acceptable documentation to establish veteran eligibility.⁶

⁵ Veterans must meet program eligibility requirements, including whether they (1) served at least one day of active duty and had a discharge other than dishonorable as verified on their discharge papers (DD214) and (2) are homeless or at risk of homelessness in the next 60 days. HVRP grantees are also encouraged to assess whether the potential enrollee would benefit from employment services (National Veterans’ Technical Assistance Center 2020).

⁶ As described in a grant officer memo from January 2021, the COVID-19 pandemic-related exception allowed VA Medical Centers’ Hospital Inquiry (HINQ) and a VA web application that provides external homeless service

According to site visit grantees, the most common reason veterans were found ineligible for HVRP was having a dishonorable discharge status or not having a DD214 to confirm the condition of discharge. Ten percent of grantee survey respondents reported this was a major factor contributing to non-enrollment and ineligibility. Three virtual visit grantees explicitly stated that they helped veterans without a DD214 navigate the process of obtaining one and two noted that it was more difficult to help veterans obtain the form during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic (Batko et al. 2022). The challenge obtaining the form is not unique to HVRP participants. Schwille et al. (2019) found that obtaining an electronic DD214 was difficult for homeless and other underrepresented populations. One grantee informant expressed the desire to accept other forms of verification so they can serve the veteran:

“I think any veteran found in the system should qualify for the program regardless of DD214 status. If a veteran can’t get a DD214 but are enrolled in GPD, we’ve been told we can’t prove they’re a veteran. It’s a disservice to a veteran if they can’t get access to [services] when it’s clear that they are actually a veteran. I see that happen a lot.”

Opportunity to expand veteran eligibility. Expanding HVRP eligibility to veterans with less-than-honorable discharges is one strategy to reduce barriers to employment services among an underserved group. When asked about opportunities for improvement, informants from two site visit communities expressed interest in expanding the eligibility criteria, such as including nonmilitary spouses and veterans who have dishonorable discharges. Concerns that veterans’ poor mental health, in particular undiagnosed post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), may have resulted in their dishonorable discharges led the U.S. Department of Defense to reconsider veterans’ discharge status. Since 2015, the U.S. Department of Defense has instructed the Army Review Boards Agency (the office charged with changing military records) to give “liberal consideration” to veterans looking to upgrade their less-than-honorable discharges because of mental health conditions, traumatic brain injury, sexual assault, or sexual harassment (Sidibe and Unger 2015; Office of the Under Secretary of Defense 2017). In subsequent testimony to the U.S. House of Representatives Veterans Affairs Committee in 2020, an HVRP grantee (which was not visited as part of this study) argued that the continued exclusion of veterans with less-than-honorable discharges from VA services had substantial consequences on those veterans and on society. In testimony, this grantee explained that “bad paper” veterans, that is, those with a less-than-honorable discharge, were more likely to have PTSD, have experienced military sexual trauma (MST), and be at risk of suicide than those with honorable discharges (Seidor 2020).

Veterans with less-than-honorable discharges are also more likely to experience homelessness (Seidor 2020; Veterans Legal Clinic 2016). Excluding veterans with less-than-honorable discharges from HVRP thus excludes a group likely to be facing significant barriers to employment, such as the mental health challenges described above.

Emphasis on veterans’ skills and interests for employment opportunities

With HVRP’s ultimate goal of placing participants in jobs leading to self-sufficiency, DOL uses employment outcomes as a key indicator of program performance. On the HVRP grantee survey, more than 75 percent of grantees reported that HVRP participants were placed in jobs within three months of

organizations information about veteran availability (SQUARES) to be used for eligibility purposes (U.S. Department of Labor 2021). However, at the time of the site visits, which began in November 2020, no grantees mentioned using these to confirm eligibility.

enrollment (Batko et al. 2022). This mirrors findings from a previous study of HVRP, which similarly found that the program focused on rapid employment (Trutko et al. 2016).

Some HVRP participants interviewed during the site visits shared concerns that their job placements were not a good fit. Of the 15 veterans who said that HVRP staff helped them find their current job, 13 indicated the most readily available job openings were not a good fit for their interests, skills, or qualifications; 10 reported getting a job through HVRP that did not typically follow a 9-to-5 work schedule; and five veterans described challenging work conditions, including physically demanding manual labor or long work hours (Batko et al. 2022). These characteristics are consistent with entry-level, lower skill jobs (Acs and Loprest 2008; Acs et al. 2010). One participant observed, “I’m not too sure if they try to get you the right job as opposed to any job.” However, five of the veterans who felt they had been referred to jobs that were not the right fit also described having the option to revisit their employment plan with their HVRP case manager to seek a better match after they achieved stability in their first job.

Informants in all eight site visit communities observed that during the COVID-19 pandemic the job market for certain types of jobs—such as restaurants and hospitality—tightened and hiring freezes contributed to diminished job availability or reduced hours. In two communities, informants thought the availability of grocery store, warehouse, and health care jobs increased. However, grantees also noted that fear of in-person workplaces contributed to a decline in veterans’ interest in employment. Thus, the availability of jobs that veterans considered suitable may have also influenced the types of work that those interviewed were able to obtain.

Opportunity to focus on developing skills for better or more desirable jobs. Connecting veterans experiencing homelessness to available jobs is critical to helping them reenter the workforce. However, data from interviewed veterans suggested they could benefit from accessing jobs that were a better fit for their interests, skills, and qualifications, that followed a more typical schedule, and that featured less-demanding work conditions (as opposed to entry-level jobs). Helping veterans translate their military experiences and skills to civilian jobs is a focus of programs that help current and former military personnel transition to civilian life, such as the Transition Assistance Program.⁷ The implementation study data suggest that a similar emphasis in HVRP that prioritizes skill building through activities such as on-the-job training and internships could provide an opportunity for veterans to bolster their skills and find jobs that meet their interest. As one interviewed service partner suggested:

“The training part should be the biggest, and connecting people more with that type of training that will assist them in getting better jobs versus what I see more of is someone saying here’s a list of jobs, or I can connect you to this job, go do the interview. So I think more coaching... and more geared towards getting someone into a training program that will lead to a job in a certain specific time... And most of the veterans appear to want more of that training so they can apply for that work position or that special police position or this or that.”

Coordination with the homeless response system

For veterans experiencing homelessness, housing supports are available through Continuums of Care (CoCs), coordinating and governance bodies for local homelessness response systems, and public and

⁷ For more on the Transition Assistance Program, see <https://www.tapevents.mil/>.

private homeless service providers (Batko 2022). As one site visit informant noted, “If the target is veterans that are experiencing homelessness, participation in the CoC would be really important. Not just a letter of support, but a seat at the table.” Two HVRP site visit grantees reported not having a strong relationship with their CoC. They discussed miscommunication between employment and housing providers that each operated within their respective system (homelessness response system and workforce system). Grantees reported that without this coordination, housing providers are not aware of which employment supports veterans need and employment service providers are not aware of which housing supports veterans need. In turn, veterans end up cycling through multiple providers within both systems. One grantee informant said, “I don’t think the homeless side understands what’s out there in terms of employment for people [...]. And I don’t know how that translates into opportunities for the veteran’s side of things, but I do know, sometimes, people go into [HUD-]VASH and don’t have any income. I think that’s a gap area.”

In addition to CoC supports, three federally funded housing programs help veterans experiencing homelessness find housing—Supportive Services for Veteran Families (SSVF), the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development–Veterans Affairs Supportive Housing (HUD-VASH) Program, and the Grant and Per Diem (GPD) Program. These programs are described in Box 3.



Box 3. Key housing supports for veterans experiencing homelessness

- 1. Supportive Services for Veteran Families (SSVF)** is primarily a short-term, rapid-response housing program that focuses on homelessness prevention and rapid rehousing assistance. The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) administers SSVF through a competitive funding process.
- 2. The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development–Veterans Affairs Supportive Housing (HUD-VASH) Program** is a collaboration between the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and the VA. It combines housing vouchers with VA supportive services to help veterans and their families find and sustain permanent housing. HUD-VASH vouchers are allocated to jurisdictions based on a formula.
- 3. The Grant and Per Diem (GPD) Program** provides transitional housing and services until a veteran can find permanent housing. The VA administers GPD through a competitive grant funding process.

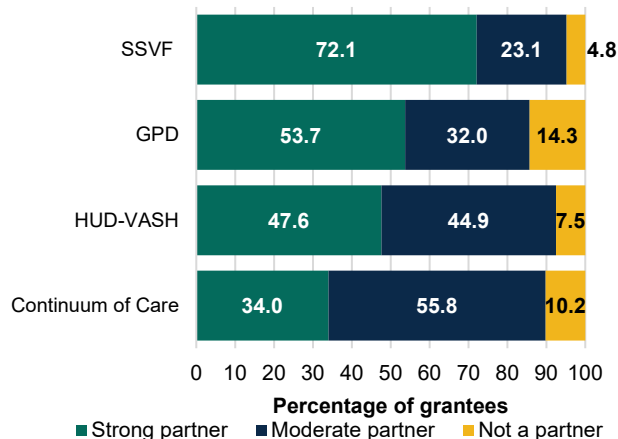
Source: VA Homeless Programs. Available at <https://www.va.gov/homeless/gpd.asp> and <https://www.va.gov/homeless/hud-vash.asp>; Supportive Services for Veteran Families. Available at <https://www.va.gov/homeless/ssvf/ssvf-overview/>.

According to the HVRP grantee survey, these three programs, rather than the CoC, were critical to the success of their programs (Figure 1). Most grantees (72 percent) considered SSVF a strong partner, followed by the GPD (54 percent of grantees) and HUD-VASH (48 percent of grantees). Only about one-third of grantees (34 percent) reported that the CoC was a strong partner.

Opportunity for deeper connections with the broader homelessness response system. HVRP’s charge is to expedite the reintegration of homeless veterans into the labor force, while the goal of the homelessness response system is to get people stably housed. All of the site visit grantees’ service areas contained a coordinated entry system, which is a federally required process to connect people experiencing homelessness to housing and assistance. Communities across the nation are beginning to integrate coordinated entry systems with workforce systems because they realize the systems have these interrelated goals (Schnur and Young 2018). As CoCs design and implement enhanced coordinated entry systems that collect and assess information about the housing, employment, and income needs of homeless veterans, participating HVRP grantees have an opportunity to work with these systems. As suggested by the two grantees that did not have a strong connection to the CoC, increased participation in

the broader homeless response system as well as in enhanced coordinated entry systems could support veterans’ parallel goals of finding and maintaining stable housing and employment.

Figure 1. HVRP grantees’ perceptions of the strength of their partnerships



Source: 2020 HVRP grantee survey, question E1: “To what extent do you consider each of the following a partner to your HVRP program, including any that you subcontract with or that is part of your grantee organization? A “moderate partner” is one that you work with but is not considered critical to your program’s overall success. A “strong partner” is one that is considered critical to the success of your program.”

Note: Sample includes 147 grantees.

GPD = Grant and Per Diem Program; HUD-VASH = U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development-U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs Supportive Housing; HVRP = Homeless Veterans’ Reintegration Program; SSVF = Supportive Services for Veteran Families.

As the nation’s public workforce development system increasingly strives to meet the needs of people with multiple employment barriers, this brief described the ways in which HVRP grantees collaborated with other public workforce development programs and partners to serve participants. At the same time, interviews with HVRP site visit grantees highlighted four opportunities for enhancing veterans’ experiences and use of HVRP services, including forging stronger partnerships with the public workforce system, expanding program eligibility, orienting job services toward long-term career goals, and developing stronger connections with the homelessness response system.

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