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Veterans Homelessness is Readily and Rapidly Solvable!

Homelessness has been an issue for so long many see it as a normal feature of everyday life — intractable, inevitable, unfixable. But despite the common misconception, the scale of veterans' homelessness in Australia is both preventable and solvable.

In addition to this, we know what to do — we have proven models to follow and would have strong public support — what is missing is leadership and decisive action.

We need to put the urgency back into tackling this problem, and we cannot wait for governments to act. Homelessness is the result of choices governments have made. It is time we all ensure they make better ones.

Communities in both the United States (US) and Canada have set a course that could mark the beginning of the end of veterans' homelessness. They did not wait for government action, they took action themselves, in broad-based local community coalitions, with a common goal of ending all veterans' homelessness — starting with rough sleeping.

Now of course we need governments that are prepared to make clear and unequivocal commitments to ending veteran homelessness and willing to invest the modest additional resources required to get the job done.

To make this happen we should demonstrate that progress is possible and start building the networks, relationships and expertise needed to make this a reality, just as some US and Canadian communities have.

So far, 11 communities in the US have ended veteran rough sleeping homelessness. In Canada, we have recently seen the first community reach an important milestone of having a quality by-name list for veterans' homelessness.

An end to veterans' homelessness in this context means that they have been able to demonstrate, with data, that their community is able to meet a standard where any instances of veterans' homelessness are rare overall, brief when they do occur and a one-time thing.

This standard is measured by calculating what's called 'Functional Zero' and it is achieved when the number of veterans experiencing homelessness in a particular community is less than the number of veterans that same community has proven it can house in a month.

So far communities that have not just met this standard, but have in many cases sustained it over a number of years, include:

1. Rockford, Illinois, population 147,651, which is about an hour and a half drive from Chicago.

2. Arlington, Virginia, population 236,842, effectively a suburb of Washington DC.

3. Montgomery County, Maryland, population 1 million, a region immediately north of Washington DC.

4. Fort Myers, Florida, population 82,254.

5. Gulfport, Mississippi, population 71,870, is the second-largest city in Mississippi.

6. Riverside, California, population 330,063, effectively an outer suburb of greater Los Angeles.

7. Norman, Oklahoma, population 123,471, effectively an outer suburb of greater Oklahoma City.

8. Bergen County, New Jersey, population 932,202, effectively an outer suburb of greater New York City

9. Abilene, Texas, population 122,999, regional town.

10. Lake County, Illinois, population 696,535, regional area about an hour's north of Chicago.

11. Chattanooga, Tennessee, population 180,557.[1]

There is incredible diversity in these communities, but they have all achieved and sustained their goal of ending veterans' rough sleeping homelessness. And we could do it here.

Arlington County is a community that stands out, as you may know it hosts not just The Pentagon (the US Department of Defense) but also Arlington Cemetery, the home of America's war dead.

Tackling veterans' homelessness was understandably a priority for this community that honors the sacrifice of fallen soldiers on a daily basis.

Arlington, like the other ten communities, made a public declaration that they would not just seek to reduce homelessness, or help only the people who were on the street the day that commitment was made. No, they made a commitment to end veterans' homelessness in their community and to rally the support and resources of everyone with a stake in the issue. Which in a community like Arlington, with its identity completely tied up in the concept of honoring the sacrifice and service of veterans, was pretty much the whole community!

And therein lies the lesson, tackling the problem of homelessness, and especially veterans' homelessness, cannot just be the responsibility of homelessness non-government organisations or government departments. It needs to be everyone's responsibility.

No single organisation or department is fully accountable for ending veterans' homelessness in a community. Each local agency or service holds its own small piece of the solution, but no one has their eye on how the pieces fit together.

The sheer act of setting goals was transformative, and no community needs to wait for governments to set that goal, to develop the strategy for implementing it, they can just do it. Implementation of course becomes a challenge if governments don't come on board, but the lessons are that if communities act, governments will often follow.

Call the meeting, invite your colleagues and of course invite governments — local, state and federal, health, housing, veterans and homelessness services — all to the table.

Community action led to government action in both Canada and the US. In June 2019 the Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness (CAEH) successfully pushed for a motion to be passed in their House of Commons for the Canadian Government to come back to the Parliament with a plan in 2020 to End Veteran Homelessness by 2025.

It was not without debate,[2] but later that year the CAEH received funding from the Department of Veterans Affairs to work with up to 12 communities across Canada to reduce and end veterans' homelessness through their Built for Zero initiative[3] — similar to what the Australian Alliance to End Homelessness (AAEH) is seeking to do with our Advance to Zero Campaign.[4] Both of these efforts are modelled on the successful efforts in the US.

Late last year the Government of Canada confirmed their important and ground breaking commitment to *'ensure that every homeless veteran has a place to call home'* in what they call the 'Speech from the Throne'.[5] This was followed early this year with the CAEH officially launching the veteran community cohort of their Build for Zero Campaign.[6]

As mentioned earlier, in June the first of these communities reached an important milestone of having the first quality by-name list for veterans' homelessness in Canada — something that every successful community in the US reached too.

There are a number of common features in what the Canadians and Americans have done.

First, they sought to know by name every veteran sleeping rough in their communities. It is so simple, but currently we do not do this in Australia, outside of a handful of communities the AAEH currently works with. Borrowing the old military axiom 'time spent in reconnaissance is seldom wasted' — solving homelessness requires actionable, real-time, person-specific data on everyone experiencing homelessness.[7] We cannot gather the necessary information to house homeless veterans solely by sporadically counting them anonymously or having information collected by a handful of agencies and not shared — we have to document the names and unique needs of every veteran experiencing homelessness, have an ability to appropriately share that information among those in the community who can house and support them, monitor performance, notice fluctuations, identify problems and respond in real time.

Secondly, focus on prevention. We have to stop the flow of veterans into homelessness. There are tools being developed to assess veterans for risk of homelessness including some excellent work being done at the University of Pennsylvania's National Centre on Homelessness Among Veterans for the US Department of Veterans Affairs.[8] If we understand who is at highest risk of homelessness, and we understand a veteran's pathway into homelessness, then we can intervene well before homelessness occurs.

Thirdly, use Housing First. As we know, Housing First works and it does so because it is a recovery-oriented approach to ending homelessness that centres on quickly moving people experiencing homelessness into independent and permanent housing and then providing additional supports and services as needed.[9] Housing First is an evidence-based approach that has been proven to work with homeless veterans and is at the heart of every successful effort to prevent and reduce homelessness.[10]

Finally, partnerships are crucial. No one organisation or part of government can solve this problem alone. Not the Department of Veterans Affairs or the largest housing provider. Ending veteran homelessness will require an additional investment in communities — in housing, supports and coordination — but we need to build the collaborative infrastructure and we don't have to wait for governments to start that task.

Canada and the US are demonstrating that veteran homelessness in is solvable. We know what to do and how to do it — all that's missing is collective leadership and decisive action.

Our veterans in Australia have provided their service, it's time for the rest of us to step up and provide them the service they deserve.

The AAEH and the Salvation Army are interested in making veterans' homelessness history in Australia. At the Salvation Army we'll be announcing a number of actions over the coming months. The Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness stands ready to share with us what they have learned. If you want to get involved, get in touch! Together we can show that veterans' homelessness is readily and rapidly solvable.

Endnotes

1. *Built for Zero*, Community Solutions, 2020 *https://community.solutions/our-solutions/built-for-zero/#movement*

2. The Canadian Press, 'After partisan bickering, House backs motion to end veterans' homelessness', *National Post*, 2019. *https://nationalpost.com/pmn/news-pmn/canada-news-pmn/after-partisan-bickering-house-backs-motion-to-end-veterans-homelessness*

3. *Built for Zero Canada*, 2020. *https://bfzcanada.ca/*

4. *Advance to Zero*, Australian Alliance to End Homelessness, 2020. *https://aaeh.org.au/atoz*

5. *Throne Speech makes ending veteran homelessness a priority for the 43rd Parliament*, Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness, 2019. *https://caeh.ca/throne-speech/*

6. *Functional Zero Veteran Homelessness*, 2020, video recording, Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness. *https://caeh.ca/functional-zero-veteran-homelessness/*

7. *Why real-time data is the foundation for ending homelessness*, Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness, 2018. https://caeh.ca/real-time-data/

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9. Polvere L, MacLeod T, Macnaughton E, Caplan R, Piat M, Nelson G, Gaetz S, and Goering, P 2014, *Canadian Housing First toolkit: The At Home/Chez Soi experience*. Calgary and Toronto: Mental Health Commission of Canada and the Homeless Hub. *http://housingfirsttoolkit.ca/*

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