

PROMISING PRACTICES



Summit galvanizes community partnerships to curb homelessness among veterans

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Servicemen and servicewomen who have courageously served our nation often face challenges of unemployment, unaffordable housing, and homelessness when they return to their communities.

The president set a priority to end homelessness among veterans by 2015. To help reach this goal, the Department of Veterans Affairs Medical Center (VAMC) in Erie, Pennsylvania, invited key community leaders—agency directors, funding sources, political leaders, and service providers—to participate in a Homeless Summit.

“We couldn’t accomplish our goals without enlisting community support,” explained Michael Wehrer, Homeless Care Team supervisor at the [Erie VAMC](#). “Ending veterans’ homelessness requires extensive collaboration among community partners plus resources from federal, state, and local governments,” he said.

The summit participants were selected because of their knowledge of homeless issues, ability to take action, and authority to make decisions. Their task was to develop collaborative community partnerships and address multiple barriers faced by homeless veterans. “Communitywide strategic planning is a pivotal step in ending homelessness,” Wehrer added.

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Volume 7, Issue 6
August 2012

About the ECS Promising Practices newsletter series

An organization receiving exemplary recognition in its CARF survey report stands out because of its professional and strategic response to a service or business need. CARF presents these ECS Promising Practices articles to encourage dialogue among service providers and to offer examples of creative solutions for improving service quality.

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Summit participants were divided into smaller groups to brainstorm ideas. A facilitator documented each group's responses on:

- Barriers experienced in accessing VA resources.
- Obstacles in obtaining federal and state funding.
- Suggestions for sharing available funds to help homeless persons.
- Specific actions that each participant could contribute to achieve the goal to end homelessness.

Input from the summit's participants helped the Erie VAMC develop an action plan, but strategic planning did not end at the conclusion of the summit. A follow-up meeting with select community partners continued the dialogue on ways to better serve homeless veterans.

Since the first Homeless Summit in 2010, the communitywide strategic planning summit has become an annual event. The Erie VAMC Homeless Care Team has expanded its community activities by conducting several hundred outreach sessions in a catchment area covering five counties in Pennsylvania, Ohio, and New York. These activities include presentations, participation on panels, meetings, and distribution of materials. In a recent [CARF](#) survey report, the Erie VAMC was "commended for its extensive community engagement efforts."

The exemplary citation concluded, "The team has used this information outreach work to enable it to produce current and accurate 'on-demand' resource lists for veterans in need of services."

At present, the Homeless Care Team provides housing for more than 60 veterans who otherwise might be homeless.

American industrialist Henry Ford (1863–1947) said, "Coming together is a beginning, keeping together is progress, working together is success." The quotation aptly describes the teamwork of the Erie VAMC and its community partners.

Below: Kathy Mahood, chief of the Behavioral Health program at the Erie VAMC, facilitates one of the group discussions during the Homeless Summit.



For more information about the homeless program at the Erie VA Medical Center, contact Michael Wehrer, Homeless Care Team supervisor, at Michael.Wehrer@va.gov. The Erie VAMC website is at www.erie.va.gov.

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