

# PLAN TO END VETERAN HOMELESSNESS IN 2015



City of Trenton & Mercer County, NJ

November 2015



## A Call to Action

### Introduction

The Mercer Alliance to End Homelessness has joined with Mayor Eric Jackson of Trenton and Mercer County Executive Brian Hughes in a **Call to Action to End Veteran's Homelessness** in the Trenton/Mercer area by the end of 2015. There is a broad commitment to make ending veteran's homelessness a reality. This plan is a blueprint for how this commitment was turned into action and how the commitment will be maintained in the future. Our community joined a national effort to end veteran's homelessness. Our leaders have joined the "Mayor's Challenge to End Veteran Homelessness". This challenge was made by First Lady Michelle Obama and has been answered by elected official across the



*"I am happy to accept the First Lady's Challenge to End Veteran Homelessness. This is a moral imperative. Veterans have served us - it is only right that we provide them with housing and services. I'm committed to ending veteran's homelessness in 2015. – City of Trenton Mayor, Eric Jackson*

country. Several communities have already achieved this goal. Having already begun our efforts, the Trenton/ Mercer community is well positioned to join the national initiative and achieve the goal by the end of 2015. The leadership of Mayor Jackson and Mercer County Executive Hughes creates momentum and brings important visibility to the issue.

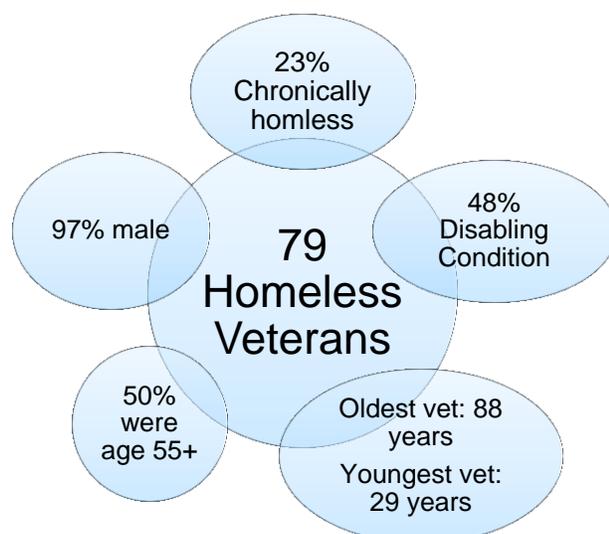
### What We Know Nationally about Veteran's

#### Homelessness

No one should ever go without a safe, stable place to call home. Yet every night across the country veterans are experiencing homelessness. The 2014 National Point in Time Count (PIT) identified 49,933 veterans experiencing homelessness in the United States during a single night, or 11% of the total homeless population counted (578,424). Nationally, about half of veterans who are experiencing homelessness have serious mental illness; 70 percent have substance use problems; over half have other health problems. Homelessness exacerbates poor health and behavioral health and increases an individual's contact with the criminal justice system.

#### What We Know About Homeless Veterans in Trenton/Mercer Community

Veterans make up 6% of the homeless singles population that entered the



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shelter system in Mercer County in 2014. In developing our Plan we identified **79** veterans who were prioritized for housing. The Mercer Alliance to End Homelessness has provided leadership on this process.

## Federal Effort to End Veteran's Homelessness Results in a Decrease in Homelessness both Locally and Nationally

The United States Interagency Council on Homelessness developed a Plan to End Homelessness called "***Opening Doors the Federal Strategic Plan to Prevent and End Homelessness***" in 2010. Veteran homelessness was identified as a strategic area of focus and since that time there have been new federal resources made available to address this issue:



- **HUD-Veterans Affairs Supportive Housing (HUD-VASH)**

This program combines Housing Choice Voucher (HCV) rental assistance for homeless Veterans with case management and clinical services provided by the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA).

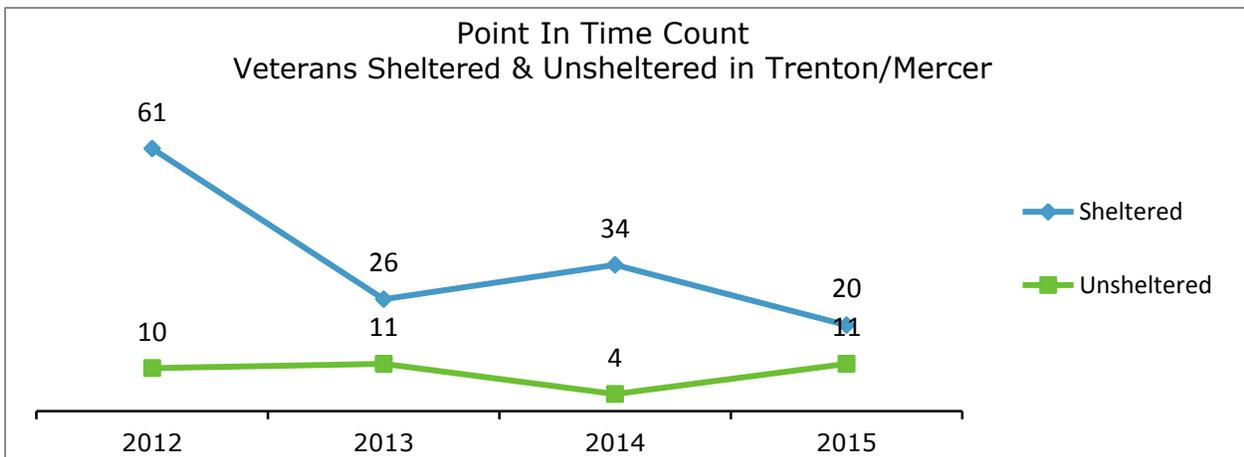
- **VA Supportive Services for Veteran Families (SSVF)**

This Program provides funds for supportive services to very low-income Veteran families in or transitioning to permanent housing. Funds assist very low-income Veteran singles and families by providing a range of supportive services designed to promote housing stability.

*"We have shown that we can rapidly house families once we have a focused effort. We can and will do the same for veterans. We will house every homeless veteran before the end of 2015" – Mercer County Executive, Brian Hughes*

These new resources have been instrumental in decreasing homelessness. Since 2010, homelessness among veterans nationally has declined by 33 percent. The number of unsheltered veterans declined by 43 percent, and the number counted in sheltered settings declined by 26 percent.

Mercer County has also experienced this decline. Homelessness among veterans has declined by 56% since 2012. Veterans counted in sheltered settings declined by 67% since 2012. Unsheltered veterans increased by 9% or from 10 persons to 11 since 2012.



## Moving from Decreasing to Ending Veteran's Homelessness

Veterans are a unique population that need and deserve our special attention and our commitment to ending their homelessness. The Trenton/Mercer Community has developed this Plan to make ending veterans homelessness a reality. We believed that a focused effort could get us there. Much has been achieved but we should not rest until there are no homeless veterans in our community. With the leadership of Mayor Jackson and Mercer County Executive Hughes, and the strategic focus of the Mercer Alliance to End Homelessness, we have identified all veterans in shelters and on the street and developed housing plans to meet their needs. Homelessness will be ended for all 79 individuals identified by the end of 2015. We will then put in place a system to identify any new veterans entering the homeless system and develop interventions to ensure that they are prioritized and moved quickly to housing.

**Veterans will be defined, for the purpose of this plan, as all those who have been in the US Military or the National Guard, regardless of their discharge status.**

## Goals of the Plan:

- 1. Identify all homeless veterans in the Trenton/Mercer community and house them by the end of 2015.** We developed a methodology to identify all veterans experiencing homelessness within the community by name and created a shared list to ensure that no veteran falls through the cracks. All veterans will be linked to housing and services.
- 2. Adopt the concept of Functional Zero. After 2015 any veteran who becomes homeless will be screened, prioritized and housed within 30 days.** Functional Zero recognizes that veterans may continue to become homeless but it is a commitment to ensure that their homelessness will be brief, rare and non-recurring.

## What currently exists in the Trenton/Mercer community that will help make ending Veteran's homelessness a reality.

The Trenton/Mercer community is well positioned to achieve the goal of ending veterans' homelessness. This plan outlines the organized effort to identify, screen and prioritize veterans in all our housing programs until we have can be certain that all 79 individuals are housed.

- 1. A Coordinated Entry and Assessment System (CEASe)** was implemented in May 2015 with the mission of creating and organized process to ensure that individuals who become homeless can move to permanent housing as quickly as possible. The CEAS Center, operated by the City of Trenton, focuses on those with the longest history of homelessness. The CEAS Center **now prioritizes** veterans who have a long history of homelessness or are chronically homeless.

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2. Trenton/Mercer has developed **Rapid Rehousing** programs for both families and singles. They provide short term rental assistance and case management to move individuals and families with low barriers quickly out of homelessness. Mercer County has received

*Housing First is an approach that centers on providing homeless people with housing quickly and then providing services.*

national recognition for our Family Rapid Rehousing program. These programs now prioritize veterans and focus their outreach to veterans.

3. Trenton /Mercer Continuum of Care (COC) has developed **Housing First** and other Permanent Supportive Housing options. Currently there are 228 HUD housing vouchers

serving both chronically homeless and other homeless populations in permanent housing. When there are vacancies in these programs they **now prioritize** veterans.

The Trenton/Mercer community is committed to using a **Housing First** approach to connect homeless veterans to appropriate services and permanent housing. Through a coordinated screening process, and partnerships with Soldier On, Community Hope and other housing providers, veterans can be quickly linked to the housing and supportive services they need. The newly created **CEASE System** will identify and engage veterans who are experiencing homelessness and help them connect to the assistance available through VA homeless programs and other housing resources.

For veterans who have a military discharge status that may make them ineligible to receive VA health services or other types of assistance from the VA, Continuum of Care programs and mainstream systems to provide access to affordable housing, health care and behavioral health care, and opportunities for work and incomes will be our strategy to achieve the goal of ending homelessness for all veterans.

The **CEASE System** will screen all veterans to determine level of need. VA-SSVF resources will be our primary resource for veterans eligible for services. Continuum of Care and affordable housing options will be our strategy for all other veterans.

*The Mercer Alliance to End Homelessness is joining with Mayor Jackson and County Executive Hughes in the challenge to end veteran homelessness by 2015. It is our mission to End Homelessness and we know it takes a Plan, a commitment and a lot of hard work from our partners. We have these elements in place and will meet our target" – Frank Cirillo, Executive Director, Mercer Alliance to End Homelessness*

## Action Steps to End Veteran's Homelessness

### 1. Leadership

The key leadership in this Plan comes from Mayor Eric Jackson of Trenton and Mercer County Executive Brian Hughes who have accepted the **Mayor's Challenge to End Veteran's Homeless** in our community. Accepting this Challenge and providing leadership for the implementation of this Plan creates the political will to end veteran homelessness. Both Mayor Jackson and Mercer County Executive Hughes have endorsed the Action Steps in this Plan and see ending veteran's homelessness as the first step in ending homelessness for all populations. The Plan

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focuses City and County resources on a single goal: it will bring new resources and new partners to the effort of ending veteran's homelessness.

## 2. Partnerships

Partnership with government, non-profit homeless service providers and the veteran's community will be essential to this effort. In 2014, the Trenton/Mercer CoC Singles Planning Committee recognized the need to develop a Veteran Ad Hoc Committee. Under the leadership of Frank Cirillo, the Veterans Committee began to look at data and the issues and solutions for addressing veteran's homelessness. In early 2015, The Mercer Alliance to End Homelessness convened a committee of these partners to develop a strategy and begin implementation. It was important to engage everyone in the task of identifying every homeless veteran in the community. This required a special effort on the part of the Rescue Mission, the shelter for homeless singles and the agencies who provide street outreach in the community, Catholic Charities and Oaks Integrated Care. It required an active collaboration with veteran service providers, Soldier On and Community Hope, as well as the Veterans Administration. This collaboration has proved successful; 64 homeless veterans have been housed since January 2015. This Plan now adds a coordinated community effort and new resources to the task to ensure that newly identified veterans are screened and quickly housed.

## 3. Identify all homeless veterans

- ***Create a master list of homeless veterans in the Trenton/Mercer area***

An important first step has been taken. A master list with 79 Individuals was created and has served to focus our efforts. The first task was to screen all veterans on the list to understand their level of need for housing. Some needed permanent supportive housing, some senior housing and others short term rental assistance. All of the partners utilize the same list and new individuals will be identified and added through outreach efforts. All identified veterans on this list will be housed by the end of 2015.

- ***Outreach: Ensure that street outreach effort is in place to identify unsheltered veterans***

Both veteran's agencies and current outreach programs will identify and screen newly identified veterans on an ongoing basis.

## 4. Prioritize veterans for HUD CoC vouchers and Rapid Rehousing programs

- The newly developed CEASe System provides a vehicle to prioritize veterans for HUD Continuum of Care vouchers. The goal of the CEASe System is to prioritize chronically homeless individuals with the longest history of homelessness



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and with the most severe service needs. A priority list has been developed and the CEAS Center is currently housing these individuals. Chronically homeless veterans with the longest histories of homelessness and most severe service needs will be given priority for housing in this system until all identified veterans in need of permanent supportive housing are safely housed.

- Rapid Rehousing programs will also prioritize veterans. Individuals who can move out of homelessness with short term rental assistance and case management efforts will be targeted for rapid rehousing and those individuals who are not eligible for VA assistance will take priority.

## 5. Identify all housing resources and create a target for how many will be utilized to house veterans

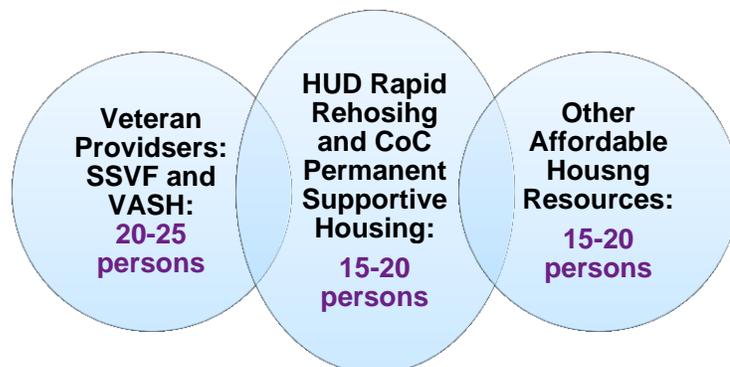
All potential housing resources will be actively explored including, but not limited to, Public Housing Authorities and Senior Housing, Section 8 Housing, and other Mercer County and City of Trenton housing resources. The leadership of Mayor Jackson and County Executive Hughes will help achieve these goals.

## 6. Maximize Veterans Programs and ensure timely referral process to programs

We have begun to work collaboratively with our veteran service provider partners HUD VASH, Soldier On and Community Hope. The master list has been developed using our combined resources. This effort already housed 63 individuals since January 1, 2015. These programs have now become part of our biweekly meetings to ensure that we are all targeting the same individuals. We will track the length of time from referral to housing in the VA funded programs and identify barriers to rapid housing.

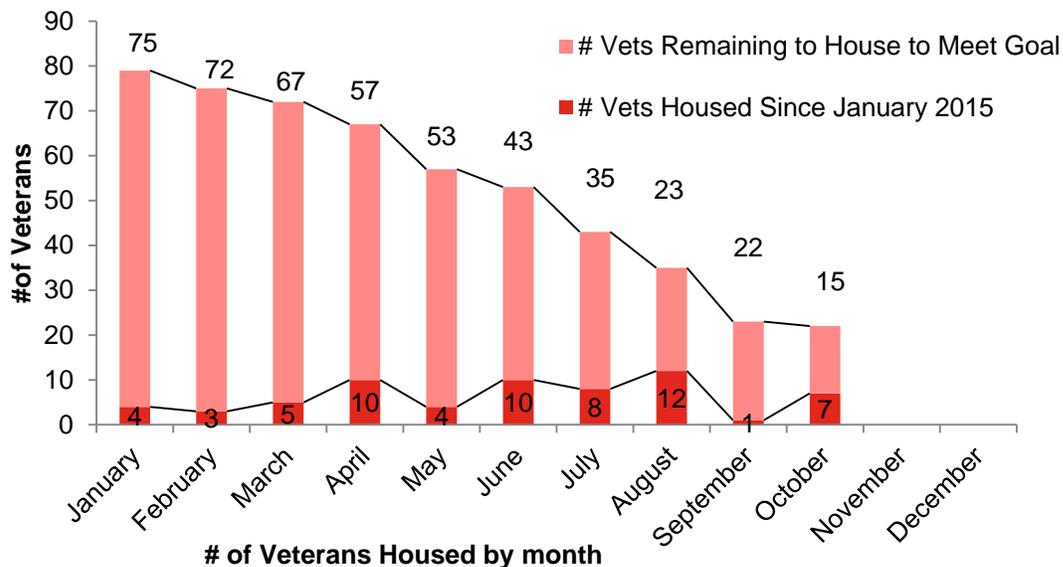
## 7. Set housing goal and track progress.

- **Housing Goal:** Our housing goal is clear: all 79 homeless veterans will be housed no later than December 31, 2015. This goal will be achieved utilizing various housing resources.



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- **Dashboard:** A transparent and easy to use tool will track our progress in housing the veterans on our list. It will assist us with our laser focus on ending veteran's homelessness by the end of 2015.



### 8. Identify needed support services and resources for veterans

Screening all veterans on the master list has helped to understand the support service needs of each individual. Some have mental health and substance abuse issues; others needed employment assistance. Many have not taken advantage of veteran's services or benefits they are eligible for. These issues will be part of the Plan to house the individual.

### 9. Create a Functional Zero Plan for the Trenton/Mercer community

Functional Zero is a state at which episodes of homelessness among veterans are brief, rare, and non-recurring. We recognize that veterans will continue to become homeless after 2015 but this plan puts in place a new screening, and prioritization system that will remain in place so that veterans can be identified quickly and moved to housing. We will ensure that no veterans are left unsheltered and any newly identified veterans will have rapid access to permanent housing. That is our functional zero commitment. It will continue as our operating principle into 2016 and beyond.

## ENDING VETERAN HOMELESSNESS

**This plan outlines the commitment of the Trenton/Mercer CoC and the strategic efforts the Mercer Alliance to End Homelessness, in partnership with the City of Trenton and Mercer County, has undertaken to end veteran homelessness in 2015 and beyond. We will organize our resources and find new ones to ensure that all homeless veterans can be housed. We will continue to monitor and report to the community on progress.**