

**National Veterans' Technical Assistance Center (NVTAC)  
Overview of Homeless Veterans Community Employment Services (HVCES)  
Community of Practice (CoP)  
Thursday, September 29, 2022, 3:00–4:00 p.m. ET**

### **NVTAC Staff**

Steve Dudasik, NVTAC Coach  
Jenn Steigerwald, NVTAC Coach

### **Presenter**

Carma Heitzmann, Ph.D., National Director, HVCES

### **Key Points**

- **Introduction**
  - Steve Dudasik welcomed grantees to the September HVCES CoP event, and introduced grantees to the key presenter, Dr. Carma Heitzmann.
  - This session provided an opportunity for grantees to learn more about HVCES and how grantees can best partner with them.
- **HVCES Mission**
  - The mission of HVCES is to provide employment services and resources to veterans that are enrolled in homeless programs. The most significant part of this is increasing access to permanent housing and improving housing stability.
  - When you hear about the homeless program office or any homeless program service, the mission is permanent housing. Sometimes employment takes a back seat to ensuring veterans have a safe and stable place to live. One of the roles of HVCES is to make sure that employment is part of the discussion.
  - Ending veteran homelessness is accomplished by providing direct services. HVCES works directly with veterans but, more importantly, provides a bridge to employment opportunities and resources in the local community.
  - The intent of HVCES is not to duplicate services or reinvent what is already going well. Instead, HVCES staff build bridges to what already exists in local communities.
- **HVCES Vision**
  - The vision of HVCES is to ensure every veteran who is assessed for homeless program services be asked about their interest in employment, regardless of whether they are disabled.
  - It is very important for HVCES staff to understand every veteran may benefit and be interested in returning to some form of competitive employment, regardless of whether a veteran has social security income or is service connected.
  - Disability status does not rule out veterans when HVCES is working with them or connecting them to resources. HVCES makes sure veterans who say they are interested in receiving employment have easy access to those services.

- Veterans experiencing homelessness may encounter several barriers as they seek competitive employment and reintegrate in the community. Examples of these barriers are:
  - Poor work history (it is common for veterans to have not worked for a decade, or more);
  - Lack of transportation;
  - Not having the right clothes for working;
  - History of justice involvement;
  - History of substance use; and/or
  - Mental health concerns.
- The other component of HVCES' vision is to ensure services provided are not one size fits all. Not everyone will need the same level of services or the same type of services. It is an ideal situation if a veteran who has experienced a period of homelessness has a good work history, and just needs help updating their resume or finding job leads. However, HVCES wants to make sure that services are available all the way to the other end of the continuum.
- Veterans may need full supported employment services longer-term. There is not a time limit involved to helping the veteran and services are provided on a case-by-case basis depending on the care they need.
- **HVCES Staffing**
  - HVCES is staffed by vocational development specialists or employment specialists. HVCES has staff that function as Community Employment Coordinators (CECs) that, ideally, HVRP grantees are in contact with.
  - CECs are funded at almost every U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) medical center. There are roughly 155 sites with CECs, and are multiple CECs at certain locations. For example, Los Angeles, California has a huge catchment area and many veterans experiencing homelessness. This area has roughly five CECs. HVCES has more than one CEC in Atlanta, and a few other large population locations.
  - Under the same umbrella, there are Health Care for Homeless Veterans (HCHV), or U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development-VA Supportive Housing (HUD-VASH) staff at most sites. There are 21 HCHV employment specialists and 68 HUD-VASH employment specialists. Employment specialists are embedded in HUD-VASH teams and are direct service providers. HCHV employment specialists are located at a Community Resource and Referral Center. HCHV staff might be in a community-based, outpatient clinic located in a variety of settings.
  - The reason HVCES does not have more HCHV staff is, when funding became available a few years ago for these positions, sites were able to choose how to round out their team when working with veterans experiencing homelessness. For some of those sites, employment staff rose to the top. For other sites, it was more important to have an outreach person, an additional clinician, or a peer specialist.

- **The Role of the CEC**
  - The role of the CEC is to coordinate with community partners to develop strategies and augment existing employment services to resolve barriers.
  - The expectation is CEC staff are bridges to services in the community. CEC staff go into the community and look at what services are available, identify gaps, and bring that information back to the homeless program teams and veterans being served.
  - The CEC staff are not the only bridge, there are also coordinated entry specialists. HVCES considers the CEC to be the point person connecting veterans with the employment services they need in the community. CECs are the employment subject matter experts within the homeless program team, and most of the homeless program staff for HVCES are social workers or clinicians.
  - Employment should be part of the plan to move a veteran from homelessness to permanent housing, but is not always an easy message to deliver or hear. HVCES has made substantial progress incorporating employment in recent years. Employment is not for every single veteran that is served, but it must be part of the discussion. CECs are part of the mission and were developed to provide expertise and be the voice of employment within HVCES teams.
- **HCHV and HUD-VASH Employment Specialists**
  - The difference between the CECs, HCHV, and HUD-VASH employment specialists are that CECs are typically providing direct services to veterans and have small caseloads. CECs are not providing as much one-on-one care to veterans as the HCHV and HUD-VASH employment specialists do.
  - CECs spend at least 60 to 75 percent of their time in the community, working with partners, and developing employment opportunities. The CEC's time in the field may fluctuate in rural areas and they provide more direct services, because there are not as many service alternatives.
- **What HVCES is Not**
  - HVCES is not a discrete program.
  - A veteran experiencing homelessness who is receiving services from a VA homeless program will automatically be able to access employment assistance from one of the HVCES staff. There is no formal consult, medical clearance, or separate admission or intake required for enrollment.
  - HVCES is part of the services the homeless program team will provide, similar to a referral for a nursing service or other kinds of medical care. HVCES does not want veterans to jump through additional hoops or go through other processes.
  - At a "Stand Down" event, if the HVCES staff meets a veteran interested in employment services that is already part of Veterans Health Administration (VHA) homeless programs, they are automatically enrolled. That is the only connection that will need to be made for the veteran to get HVCES services.
  - HVCES staff do refer veterans internally, but it is not a separate program within the homeless program teams.
  - This coordination differs from site to site. The intent is for HVCES to be site- and community-specific. What a CEC is doing in Los Angeles is going to look different than what they are doing in Kansas or in a small town in the Midwest.

- HVCES programs are going to have some consistent themes. However, the partners and resources available differ from community to community. Sometimes there are more resources, and sometimes there are fewer resources with certain gaps. For example, some sites can help with transportation, and other sites cannot.
- HVCES staff are expected to help figure out how to fill gaps to make a veteran's access to services coordinated and streamlined.
- **Why We Collaborate**
  - There is a great deal of research that tells us that community collaboration is one of the most effective and important parts of success in getting people jobs, as well as training and services. Community collaboration is also more effective to get people housed.
  - It is important to collaborate with community partners, as we cannot effectively help people in a vacuum. Dr. Heitzmann likes to tell colleagues and friends who are not familiar with employment services that, to successfully help a veteran, "you have to have at least one other person working with you, and that is an employer." Employment services for someone who is experiencing homelessness takes more than one case manager working with that veteran to be successful. There must be collaboration with employers and community partners to help that veteran re-enter the workforce.
- **Resources**
  - [Locate CEC staff](#)
    - HVCES understands that calling a VA and not knowing who to ask for when going through the phone system is not a quick and effective method to locate the CEC, so HVCES has an external facing website for this purpose. For example, if you are in Alabama you can click on Alabama and see who in your area is the local CEC, and you will find the contact information. HVCES keeps it updated regularly. The CEC contact list was launched in 2014, and it took a lot of rapport building to get contact information on the site.
  - [Learn more about HVCES](#)
    - You can find a general explanation of HVCES through the page.
  - [Read employment-focused success stories](#)
    - HVCES shares employment focused success stories when a veteran wants to share their experience about good things that have happened. HVCES has highlighted partnerships in the past and is always looking for new partnership success stories.
  - [Read the "HVCES Fact Sheet"](#)
- **Additional Resources and How to Help**
  - Helpful links:
    - Read the [VA Homeless Program Fact Sheet](#)
    - Visit the [VA Homeless Program website](#)
    - Read the [VHA Homeless Programs Office Strategic Plan](#)
    - Learn about [VA assistance to help avoid eviction](#)
  - If you encounter a veteran who is at-risk of or experiencing homelessness, they can contact the National Call Center for Homeless Veterans at (877) 424-3838.

There are trained counselors available to provide information on many VA programs, healthcare, and other services.

## Discussion and Q&A

- **Grantee Question:** How can I find who my coordinator is in New Jersey?
  - **HVCES Response:** The first link that was shared, [Locate CEC staff](#), should help to track down programs by state.
- **Grantee Question:** If a veteran does not have VHA healthcare, can they still receive services from a CEC?
  - **HVCES Response:** The rule of thumb is if the veteran is enrolled in the VHA homeless program such as HUD-VASH or Grant Per Diem, they can also receive employment services through the homeless program. That does not mean they will be receiving all VHA healthcare services.
- **Grantee Comment:** Working with your [American Job Centers](#) (AJCs) is an important partnership to foster.
- **Grantee Comment:** Working with the VHA has been such a beneficial partnership with the Alabama region.
- **HVCES Comment:** [Veteran Readiness and Employment](#) (VR&E) is a great resource for veterans who qualify, although a small number of veterans served by the VHA are eligible. For more information, visit the [VR&E](#) webpage.

## Conclusion

- The CoP will continue monthly moving forward. Information on how to register for future CoP events is posted on [Community of Practice – National Veterans' Technical Assistance Center \(nvtac.org\)](#).
- These slides and recording will be posted on the [NVTAC Community of Practice webpage](#).
- Grantees can reach out to Dr. Heitzmann directly with any questions at [Carma.Heitzmann@va.gov](mailto:Carma.Heitzmann@va.gov).