

The Housing and Urban Development — Veterans Affairs Supportive Housing Program (HUD-VASH) run by MaineHousing shows that collaboration between federal agencies and public housing authorities can bring hope, health, and housing to homeless veterans.

In 2009, there were more than 450 homeless veterans in Maine. The majority were between the ages of 31-64 and were homeless between one week and one month. In tracking this homeless population, we learned that when they leave shelters very few move into good, stable housing situations. Too often, they are caught in situations that make it virtually impossible for them to secure any type of housing.

That leads to situations like that of “John,” a veteran who spent 35 years abusing drugs and alcohol and who lived for eight years in homeless shelters from North Carolina to Maine.

Now, thanks to HUD-VASH, he is living in decent housing and is clean and sober.

The HUD-VASH program combines Housing Choice Voucher (HCV) rental assistance for homeless veterans with case management and clinical services provided by the Veterans Affairs Medical Center (VAMC). This combination of housing and services provides these homeless veterans with a way out, and an opportunity for a better life.

MaineHousing was awarded 35 VASH vouchers in May, 2008. Under the program, homeless veterans must be referred to MaineHousing by caseworkers at the Togus VAMC in Augusta, Maine.

When the program started, staff from MaineHousing and Togus held several meetings and worked hard to understand the different aspects of the program and make it work for Maine’s veterans.

In the initial program rollout, referrals for VASH came from the medical center, but the veterans were not eligible to use the voucher until case management was in place. Rather than place a hold on the housing, MaineHousing assisted the veterans through our regular voucher process by giving them a homeless preference.

Once the VA hospital was able to hire case managers, the referrals started coming to us. We work with the case managers to move the veterans into secure housing as quickly as possible.

In order to assure a successful tenancy, here are the steps we follow:

- We provide applications, checklists, and essential documents to the VAMC.
- We obtain referrals (completed applications) from VAMC.
- We obtain homeless verification, and suitability for the program, from VAMC.
- We do a sex offender background check only (other criminal background screening is not applicable).
- Under certain conditions, veterans can transfer their VASH housing voucher to other communities within Maine or to another state.

- The voucher term must be for 120 days initially, with extensions permitted.
- The VA caseworker must approve the unit as suitable for the tenant.
- The Public Housing Authority (PHA) conducts an housing quality inspection of the unit.
- Leases for less than one year are accepted.
- VAMC provides case management.
- VA recommends termination if tenant refuses needed services.
- Vouchers turned back in are used for new homeless veterans.

In addition to working with the VAMC, MaineHousing also has worked closely with the Portland Housing Authority, which was awarded 35 VASH vouchers in October, 2009. By then, MaineHousing had placed several veterans in Portland Housing Authority's jurisdiction.

We worked with Portland to transfer existing VASH participants and regionalize the administration. Again, this shows how a state PHA and a local PHA can work together with the VAMC and provide the best service possible to homeless veterans.

MaineHousing was awarded another 25 VASH vouchers in June, 2010, because of the success of the program.

In an effort to make the program even better, MaineHousing and the VAMC have developed a relationship with a Maine housing developer who has experience creating affordable rental properties under MaineHousing's Supportive Housing Program.

The developer has purchased and rehabilitated several properties and given a preference to VASH participants. This arrangement may also be successful if MaineHousing chooses to place project-based VASH rental assistance vouchers in properties.

While there is a waiver for some aspects of the eligibility requirements (such as income level, criminal background, and debts owed to housing authorities), these formerly homeless veterans are able to succeed due to the case management that is required and the willingness of Maine landlords to take a chance and help a veteran who has served our country.

A concrete example of how the VASH program works is illustrated by a homeless veteran who was present at the annual Togus "stand-down" veterans in October of 2008.

The veteran just started receiving social security disability, but was not receiving healthcare. The veteran registered at Togus and was referred to VASH. Once the veteran was admitted to the program, MaineHousing coordinated with the VAMC to swiftly process the VASH application and scheduled the briefing within a week.

The veteran was in his own apartment by the end of December, 2008. Once in housing, he has been consistent with his healthcare and working with his VASH case manager.

He followed up with veteran services regarding a VA pension that he filed for at the stand down. He was awarded his VA service connected pension at 100% one year later. Once the veteran was financially independent, he felt successful enough to return his voucher so that another homeless veteran would have the opportunity to get off the streets.

The veteran was very clear in saying that the housing provided by the Housing Choice Voucher, and the support provided by the case manager, made it possible for him to move from homelessness and reach his goals. The veteran now has moved on to follow his dreams.