

Peer Housing Location Assistance Groups (PHLAG) for Connecting High Barrier Veterans to Housing

An Innovative Practice in VHA Homeless Program Operations

White Paper

VA



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INTRODUCTION

The VHA Homeless Programs Office identifies and disseminates innovative practices in homeless programs operations. The North Texas Health Care System (HCS) and the Albuquerque VA Medical Center (VAMC) have been identified as sites with innovative practices in connecting high barrier Veterans to housing.

PRACTICE OVERVIEW

Intensive coaching, group collaboration, and diligent community networking can increase access to housing for high barrier Veterans.

Despite the wide variety of homeless services and resources available today, there are still homeless Veterans that have trouble obtaining permanent housing. This may be due to issues that preclude program eligibility such as lack of military service time, negative characters of discharge, receiving benefits that exceed program income limits, or even being on a State lifetime sex offender registry. As part of the national effort to end Veteran homelessness, VA and its community partners still have an expectation to serve these Veterans and connect them to housing. Since 2006, the North Texas HCS, has worked with a program model that could be a solution for many of the country's high barrier Veterans.

Originally developed by staff from the Boston VAMC in the early 2000's, Peer Housing Location and Assistance Groups (PHLAG) help Veterans secure and maintain permanent, independent housing through a combination of facilitator-led, mutual assistance groups, and intensive individual "coaching". This is not a traditional housing program. Since it has no funds for rental assistance or move-in costs, there is significant emphasis on Veterans helping each other to achieve their goals through information sharing, problem solving, and emotional support. Enrollment is voluntary as participating Veterans are expected to invest significant time and energy into the process.

Co-led by a social worker and a peer support specialist, North Texas's PHLAG hosts three "housing assistance" groups and one "apartment tour" activity per week. During the PHLAG "housing assistance" sessions, the co-leads and Veterans jointly and collaboratively assess each member's unique challenges to housing and develop strategies to help them overcome barriers. Members will share information they have on new resources, programs, or problems. Outside speakers like mortgage brokers and landlords are invited to provide tips and tricks on navigating the housing market. On other occasions, the co-leads may bring in community resources like want-ads and other flyers to the group.

Group members are encouraged by their peers to embrace the reality of their situations and develop practical solutions to their unique challenges. This may involve making preference lists of where they would like to live; developing spending plans and budgets that take projected housing expenses into account; maintaining positive, problem solving attitudes; and always asking for and giving help to other group members when needed. Taking a holistic approach, all aspects of a Veteran's situation are addressed including: bad credit, criminal history, eviction history, mental health, substance use, emotional or family issues, trauma history, housing availability, shame and embarrassment, benefit eligibility, medical problems, and budgeting. Providing for tangible needs is important and Veterans may also share gasoline vouchers and leads on furniture donations that they find.

As Veterans make progress or have setbacks, the group provides validation, practical assistance, and emotional support. Individual intensive coaching sessions with the co-leads are available to address specific obstacles through the assessment of needs, development of service plans, discussion of the Veterans story in greater detail and more privacy than what a group session would allow, referrals to services, and problem solving.

Supplementing the housing assistance groups and coaching sessions are the "apartment tours" where Veteran group members are taken out by the co-leads to physically view potential housing options in their community. This is a valuable component to PHLAG for the discussion opportunities that arise and for the hands-on experience in searching for apartments. The co-leads can also arrange for the Veterans to tour individual apartment complexes and meet the management company staff to learn more about the community and the expectations of tenancy. As many Veterans assume they can only afford substandard living, the tours provide an opportunity to realistically and concretely learn what better options may be available.

Approximately 30 to 40 Veterans are actively enrolled in PHLAG at any given time. Aligned under Health Care for Homeless Veterans (HCHV), the North Texas PHLAG team mostly works with Veterans who don't have access to traditional housing resources. However, they will occasionally partner with Housing and Urban Development-VA Supportive Housing (HUD-VASH) program clinicians to provide support for Veterans who are having trouble securing housing, acting as a safety net to ensure that their valuable housing resources will be utilized. To document their efforts, the team has special

"The PHLAG model essentially says to Veterans that if you want to really work at resolving the barriers that stand in your way of housing, PHLAG can offer you intensive coaching and support."

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admission and discharge note titles in the Computerized Patient Record System (CPRS) and utilizes the HCHV Case Management program enrollment in the Homeless Operations Management and Evaluation System (HOMES) for data tracking. **In fiscal year (FY) 2016, 67 unique Veterans were admitted to PHLAG with 24 Veterans (35.8%) achieving independent housing.**

When one of the staff at North Texas moved to the Albuquerque VAMC to take position as the HCHV Program Coordinator, she decided that Albuquerque needed a PHLAG of their own. Filling the final gap in their “No Wrong Door” policy, Albuquerque focuses exclusively on Veterans who are cannot access VA homeless programs due to being over income, on the lifetime sex offender registry, or ineligible for VA health care. Before starting PHLAG at Albuquerque, those Veterans might have been turned away due to lack of services. **Since February 2017, Albuquerque’s co-leads have helped house 4 Veterans. They project enrolling approximately 60 Veterans total in FY 2017.**

As a newer program, Albuquerque recognized that developing relationships with the community – particularly with landlords – was a key first step prior to enrolling Veterans in the program. It was important that they did not give Veterans false hope into what was available. Before a single Veteran was enrolled, the co-leads spent six months networking with agencies, landlords, State Veterans programs, and others to thoroughly understand policies and procedures and to advocate for Veterans. Advocacy may involve negotiating reduced fees, holding educational sessions to reduce stigma, or advocating that certain requirements be waived. As PHLAG at both North Texas and Albuquerque rely on building trusting, collaborative relationships, facilities should be fully prepared to dedicate a full-time social worker and full-time peer support specialist. North Texas even has PHLAG specific functional statements and position descriptions for their co-leads. The Veterans have their own special roles to play in networking and relationship building, not only through direct advocacy, but also by reminding each other that they are not just representing themselves, or PHLAG, but all Veterans.

CONCLUSION

This program model can provide new opportunities to serve Veterans who cannot access traditional VA homeless services. An implementation guide, developed by VISN 5 Mental Illness Research Education and Clinical Center (MIRECC), is currently available for interested facilities. We would like to thank the staff at the North Texas HCS, the Albuquerque VAMC, and the VISN 5 MIRECC for their time and effort in sharing this practice.

If you have questions about PHLAG or are interested in obtaining a copy of the implementation guide, please contact Alicia Lucksted, Ph.D. at Alicia.Lucksted@va.gov.