



ENDING VETERAN HOMELESSNESS IN NEW ORLEANS:

Lessons from a City that Reached the National Goal a Year Early



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TABLE OF CONTENTS



Summary	1
1. Background	3
A. Michelle Obama Challenges Mayors to End Veteran Homelessness	3
B. Homelessness and the New Orleans Landscape	5
C. Policy Framework.....	5
2. Mayors Challenge: How It Worked	7
A. Public Commitment to the Goal by the Mayor and Many Partners	7
B. Critical Actions by the Department of Veterans Affairs	9
C. Acceleration and Streamlining of Existing Operational Processes	10
D. Coordination and Outreach	13
E. Mid-Course Corrections	18
F. Taking Stock at Year's End.....	18
3. Sustaining System Innovations	19
4. Conclusion	20
Appendix: Participating Providers	21
Glossary of Acronyms	22
Acknowledgements	23

SUMMARY



On January 7, 2015, Mayor Mitch Landrieu announced that New Orleans had become the first city in the United States to end Veteran homelessness.

Ending Veteran homelessness, as part of ending all homelessness, has been an important goal of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and other federal, state, and local agencies. The 2014 White House’s Mayors Challenge to End Veteran Homelessness, spurred by the participation of First Lady Michelle Obama, set out to end homelessness among Veterans by 2015. This report tells the story of how New Orleans tapped the sense of urgency of this initiative and met this goal a year early.

To carry out this initiative, the Office of the Mayor worked with area Continuum of Care (CoC) homeless-serving agencies, UNITY of Greater New Orleans which serves as CoC convener, local landlords, the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), the military, and many other partners. Mayor Landrieu’s personal commitment and leadership shaped and drove the effort.

The operational goal for New Orleans was to reach “functional zero”—defined in this instance as providing permanent housing to all Veterans found living on the streets or in emergency shelters who would accept housing. The city further intensified its commitment by pledging to end Veteran homelessness by the close of 2014, a full year ahead of the 2015 goal set for ending Veteran homelessness nationally.

The Mayors Challenge provided no increase in funding but, in New Orleans, the initiative inspired a number of important innovations. This report identifies these innovations and discusses each in the “Mayors Challenge: How It Worked” section under four major categories.

A. Public Commitment to the Goal by the Mayor and Many Partners

B. Critical actions by the Department of Veterans Affairs

- Expediting determination of Veteran status
- Articulating systems to help VA-eligible and non-eligible Veterans
- Using New Orleans' VA Community Resource and Referral Center
- Quickly providing Veteran housing with supportive services

NOTE: Military and veteran volunteers played a key role in the city's effective outreach, detailed under the "Coordination and Outreach" section in the longer paper.

C. Acceleration and Streamlining of Existing Operational Processes

- Relying on a day-to-day implementation coordinator
- Creating and using a master list, updated daily by a single staffer, which tracked the status of each Veteran who was homeless
- Substituting Housing Choice Vouchers for service-enriched supportive housing subsidies for a segment of residents ready for, and opting for, this change in status, freeing up needed supportive housing units for Veterans
- Employing a full-time housing locator
- Emphasizing the housing navigator role
- Expediting construction of a 109-unit Permanent Supportive Housing project
- Temporarily raising the priority of homeless Veterans for placement in supportive housing

D. Coordination and Outreach

- Ensuring weekly focus at many levels of leadership and operations, to assess progress and make course corrections as necessary
- Providing weekly newsletter updates
- Using new forms of active outreach to landlords
- Making greater use of military and Veteran organization volunteers

MID-COURSE CORRECTIONS: When New Orleans stakeholders recognized that they were not on pace to achieve the goal by the end of the year, a number of crucial "mid-course corrections" were implemented, including:

- Pre-inspection of units by UNITY housing locator enabled extremely quick move-in
- Accelerating inspections of units in new PSH project expedited occupancy
- Implementation of an individual housing plan for each Veteran was supported at all levels of participating organizations
- Senior CoC leaders, assigned to work with individual housing navigators, made certain that each Veteran was housed as quickly as possible
- Shift to prioritize placement for Veterans in supportive housing: seven of every 10 placements made went to homeless Veterans

By the end of the year, the city had housed 227 Veterans and reached "functional zero."

New Orleans' response to the Mayors Challenge drew upon the city's strengths in its longstanding work to combat homelessness. The response tapped existing resources, drew on long-term relationships honed over years of collaborative work on behalf of those experiencing homelessness in New Orleans, and effectively pulled new resources and partners into the mix.

This report summarizes the background, describes the design of the initiative's operation during the last half of 2014, details some mid-course corrections, and identifies several ongoing improvements in the New Orleans homeless services system that emerged as a legacy of the effort.

The report is intended to help elected officials, administrators, and homeless-serving practitioners, as well as concerned media and activists, in communities across the country, to end Veteran homelessness.

1. BACKGROUND



Ending homelessness among Veterans is a national effort that requires the active participation of a variety of public and private organizations at all levels of government. New Orleans, with its well-developed homeless-serving sector, had been making significant progress in ending Veteran homelessness even before the Mayors Challenge. Between 2007 and just prior to the launching of the Mayors Challenge in 2014, New Orleans had reduced overall homelessness by 83 percent.

Despite this significant progress, virtually no stakeholder in New Orleans believed the city would be ending Veteran homelessness by 2015, much less by 2014. The Mayors Challenge and Mayor Landrieu's leadership energized the community.



“Ending Veteran homelessness is not something that can only be accomplished in New Orleans. But New Orleans has shown that it can be done.”

– Sam Joel, the mayor's staff lead for the initiative

A. Michelle Obama Challenges Mayors to End Veteran Homelessness

In 2014, to highlight national homelessness goals and to gain local commitment, a call to action by First Lady Michelle Obama launched the Mayors Challenge to End Veteran Homelessness. New Orleans Mayor Mitch Landrieu, along with Martha Kegel, the Executive Director of UNITY of New Orleans (the CoC convener), attended the First Lady's June 4, 2014 White House briefing.

The Mayors Challenge carried no dedicated funding, but it amplified the appeal for mayors to commit to ending Veteran homelessness in their cities. It called for strengthening partnerships among Veteran Service Organizations, community-based providers, faith-based organizations, public housing agencies, affordable housing operators, and other stakeholders.

Mayor Landrieu felt strongly that New Orleans could accomplish the goal by building on the longstanding commitment of the local CoC, the local VA office, and other stakeholders who were at that time striving to end homelessness. This cross-cutting group had been working together for years. It had been building momentum since at least 2010, with the city's adapting the goals, structures and strategies of *Opening Doors: the Federal Strategic Plan to Prevent and End Homelessness*, to address New Orleans' own circumstances.

Inspired by the challenge, on July 4, 2014, Mayor Landrieu announced the campaign to end Veteran homelessness in New Orleans by the end of the year—a mere six months. He spoke at the local World War II Museum, having already secured commitments from key community stakeholders to achieve this ambitious goal. (See Figure 1.) This public commitment injected a sense of urgency into the initiative, and the city proudly achieved this goal—a full year ahead of the national target date.

“The mayor’s role was critically important in New Orleans. But if a city doesn’t have a mayor who has or will commit to the goal, the community should seek out another respected leader, such as a retired judge, a previously elected official, or a business leader...”

– Martha Kegel, *UNITY*

Figure 1: Mayor Mitch Landrieu Launches Initiative at The National WWII Museum



B. Homelessness and the New Orleans Landscape

People experiencing homelessness, along with the entire population of the low-lying city of New Orleans, were greatly affected by two natural disasters in 2005: Hurricane Katrina and Hurricane Rita. Eighty percent of the city flooded. The storms significantly affected the entire housing, economic, and population landscape. During the evacuation, one of the largest in U.S. history, approximately 1 million people—80-90 percent of the population—left the Greater New Orleans area.

In the City of New Orleans, 134,000 housing units, or 70% of all occupied units, suffered damage. The U.S. Census reported that between 2000 and 2010, the number of households in New Orleans fell by 46,000, the vacancy rate doubled, and 25,000 units were lost either through demolition or left to the elements.

The city experienced losses of business property, revenue, jobs, and available workforce. Housing costs also rose sharply after the storms, increasing the pressures that can push people into homelessness.

These events worsened the situation faced by those experiencing homelessness and changed the face of the homeless service provider community in New Orleans. Many people were homeless before the storms; some lost their shelter arrangements; and many became newly homeless. Homeless-service agency clients and staff were scattered. Services, such as mental health and substance abuse treatment, were disrupted. These conditions exacerbated housing instability and homelessness in New Orleans.

C. Policy Framework

Opening Doors: the Federal Strategic Plan to Prevent and End Homelessness created a national framework for ending homelessness. This national initiative, launched by the Obama Administration in 2010, was the nation's first comprehensive strategy to end homelessness. It established an interagency framework for action and included the goal of ending Veteran homelessness by the close of 2015.

Several initiatives supplemented *Opening Doors*. The ***100,000 Homes Campaign***, operated by Community Solutions, sought to permanently house 100,000 chronic and vulnerable homeless Americans between July 2010 and July 2014. As part of that effort, the 2012 Rapid Results Boot Camps—which helped local communities to plan, train, and set goals to permanently house homeless Veterans—were held with active participation from the U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness (USICH), HUD, and the VA. The Boot Camps were very important in New Orleans, as was the 25 Cities Initiative, a VA-HUD-USICH effort to help communities with high concentrations of homeless Veterans to intensify and integrate their local efforts to end Veteran homelessness by 2015.

On the local level, Mayor Landrieu had worked in partnership with UNITY and many CoC members to create a 10-year plan to end homelessness in 2011 and an Interagency Council on Homelessness (ICH) in 2012. Together this leadership group crafted a Mayors Challenge approach that drew on proven national strategies as well as local strengths. **(See Table 1 on next page.)**

“The mission was about individuals: finding John under a bridge, connecting him to a housing navigator, determining his Veteran status, finding the housing best suited for him, taking him to look at specific units, and keeping him housed. It was all about the individual. Each and every one.”

***– Garry LaBorde, New Orleans
VA Hospital***

Table 1: Strategies in Place Prior to the Mayors Challenge

Strategy	Actions
Housing First	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Offered homeless persons permanent, affordable housing as quickly as possible • Allowed for assistance to clients in building skills for independent living • Included no requirements for income, sobriety, completion of a transitional residential program or training as condition for housing • Guided use of HUD-VASH (HUD-VA Supportive Housing collaboration, providing housing plus supportive services to homeless Veterans), Supportive Services for Veteran Families (SSVF), Emergency Solutions Grants (ESG) RRH, and CoC Permanent Supportive Housing (PSH)
Enlisting Partners	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recognized as fundamental to system-level service delivery • Contributed to recent successes in reducing homelessness in New Orleans and elsewhere • Built on the VA's active collaboration with New Orleans CoC agencies • Built on Mayor Landrieu's advisory group of military organizations in the New Orleans area • Included partnerships on the federal, state, and local levels
Street Outreach Teams	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Built on the city's experience in conducting day and night time street outreach • Supported by CoC grants, Projects for Assistance in Transition from Homelessness (PATH) grants, and VA staff • Employed teams of two or three street outreach workers to identify, engage, and establish trusting relationships with homeless people living on the street with the expressed goal of quickly housing them • Paid increased attention to night time outreach in Katrina's aftermath
Client Choice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emphasized by Opening Doors • Stressed importance of voluntary participation • Clients offered several different places to live
Housing Navigators	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recognized finding permanent housing as their chief role • Began using outreach workers as navigators in Katrina aftermath • Concept grew in importance with 100,000 Homes Campaign and the VA-HUD-USICH 25 Cities Initiative • Supported through SSVF, CoC (outreach and planning funds), PATH, VA, and private sources • Role adopted by other homeless-serving personnel (e.g., outreach workers, SSVF staff, night shelter staff)
Housing Locator	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identifies affordable apartments and landlords willing to participate • Serves as point of contact for landlords and providers • Maintains publically accessible database of available units, used by landlords and providers • Used by UNITY as a tactic under the 100,000 Homes Campaign.

2. MAYORS CHALLENGE: HOW IT WORKED



On July 4, 2014, Mayor Landrieu launched the Mayors Challenge to End Veteran Homelessness. How did New Orleans accomplish the goal by the end of the year?

The Mayor committed additional staff resources and called upon trusted community partners to develop and implement the initiative. Working together, these cross-sector stakeholders developed and adapted the plans and processes needed to carry out the Mayors Challenge effort. This section discusses these innovations in detail.

A. Public Commitment to the Goal by the Mayor and Many Partners

The leadership of Mayor Landrieu—with his personal commitment and demonstrated public passion for achieving the goal—was essential. In New Orleans, the mayor personally took it on, and this gave confidence and obtained the commitment from all stakeholders. *(See Table 2 on next page.)*



“If New Orleans had not publically committed to accomplishing the goal by December 2014, we would not have made it. You have to prioritize the goal and then you will find the staff and the resources to do it.”

– Nicole Sweazy, Louisiana Housing Authority Executive Director

Table 2: Key Players

Stakeholders	Contributions
Mayor and staff	Leadership, passion, vision, accountability, high visibility
City of New Orleans Office of Community Development	Mainstream HUD and other housing resources, inspectors, structure
UNITY of Greater New Orleans	CoC convening organization, day-to-day implementation lead, outreach, services, housing navigators, housing locator, PIT/Master List, list of affordable units, move-in support/furnishings
U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs	Eligibility determination, outreach, housing, services, CRRC physical center point for housing and services
Volunteers of America (VOA), Start Corporation, and Hope Center, Inc. (SSVF agencies)	Outreach, services, housing
CoC Agencies	Outreach, services, housing
Mayor’s Military Advisory Group	Outreach
Military (Navy, Marines, National Guard, Coast Guard, Army, and Army Corps of Engineers)	Outreach
Veterans of Foreign Wars	Outreach
Housing Authority of New Orleans	Voucher administration, landlord outreach, Housing Choice “graduation vouchers” for CoC PSH and VASH
State of Louisiana	Vouchers, housing
U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness	Technical guidance
U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development	Housing, services, outreach resources; resolution of regulatory questions; technical assistance

Partnership, partnership, partnership.

No single organization or program can end homelessness. Federal, state and local entities can and must work together to be successful.

“All resources really were on the table. There was no more mindset that ‘this was mine and that’s yours.’”
 – Nicole Sweazy, Louisiana Housing Authority Executive Director

B. Critical Actions by the Department of Veterans Affairs

The local VA took a number of steps that proved crucial to New Orleans’ achieving its goal in 2014. The VA streamlined many of its internal processes and coordinated effectively with CoC agencies and other stakeholders.

- **Expediting determination of Veteran status.** One of the first steps to housing Veterans was to get confirmation from the local VA whether the individual (1) had in fact served in the military and, if so, (2) was eligible for VA health care (and thus likely eligible for SSVF and HUD-VASH). Verification of Veteran status was important, as about 1 in 10 homeless persons in New Orleans claiming to be Veterans were found not to be Veterans. Moreover, many of those verified as Veterans were not eligible for VA assistance due to their discharge status.

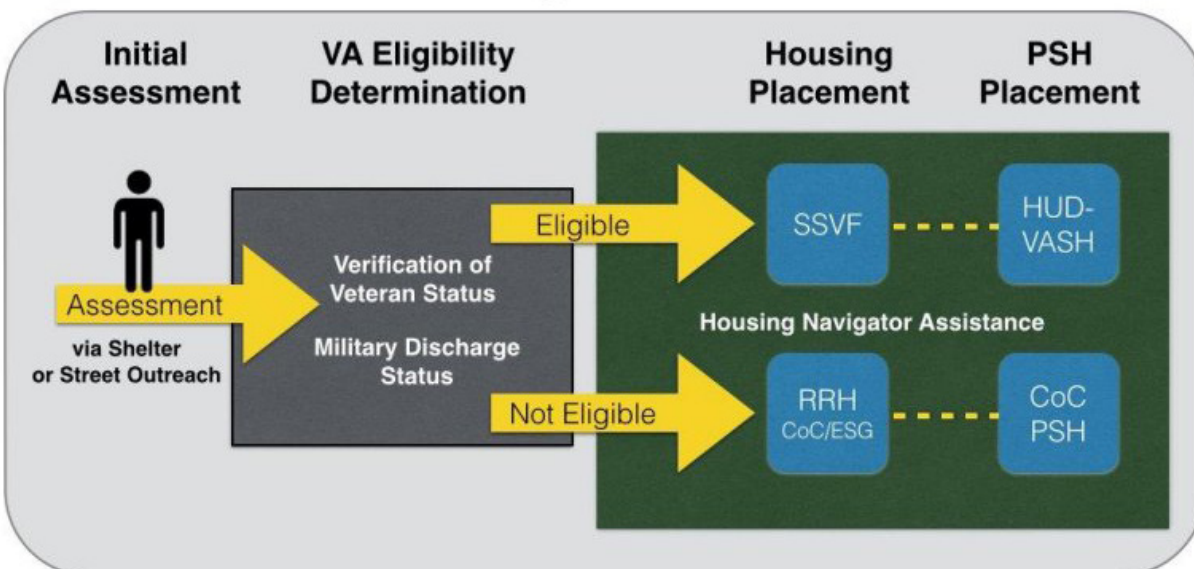
Determining Veteran status previously had taken as much as 2-4 weeks, making it difficult for outreach workers and case managers to keep Veteran clients motivated to move into housing. With the collective pressure of the Mayors Challenge and the unwavering attention paid to this issue in the weekly leadership meetings, the VA dramatically streamlined the process down to a one-day turnaround. This was a game-changer in terms of expediting Veterans’ moves—both those eligible for VA assistance and those who were not—from the streets into housing.

Ending Veteran homelessness is not the VA’s problem alone to solve—it is everyone’s. With scarce resources and an established mandate to address chronic, family, and youth homelessness, CoC providers in New Orleans had looked to the VA as the primary source for housing homeless Veterans.

The Mayors Challenge created a broader sense of partnership and gave CoC agencies the special charge of serving Veterans ineligible for VA services. And, thanks to the initiative, the local VA recognized more than ever before how much they can turn to other agencies for their contributions to helping Veterans.

- **Articulating systems to help VA-eligible and non-eligible Veterans.** To be eligible for SSVF and HUD-VASH, a Veteran must have a discharge other than dishonorable. During the Mayors Challenge, eligible Veterans were served primarily by the VA. Homeless Veterans found to be non-eligible obtained help from CoC agencies using resources such as Rapid Re-Housing (RRH) and CoC PSH. (See Figure 2.)

Figure 2: Determining Eligibility and Housing Placements



- **Using New Orleans' VA Community Resource and Referral Center (CRRC).** The Mayors Challenge benefited from New Orleans' CRRC, a central location for coordinating housing and services to Veterans. Operated by the VA, CRRC was established in 2013 with the donation of land and building by the city. Thirteen different community providers are located on site and assist clients with a wide range of assistance, including: crisis counseling, a day shelter, showers and laundry, healthcare, legal aid, job search, rapid re-housing, and permanent supportive housing such as HUD-VASH. Outreach workers who found Veterans on the streets and in shelters referred them to the CRRC, which was able to formally assess and connect them to a variety of community services. New Orleans' CRRC assists both Veterans and non-Veterans, one of the only CRRCs in the country to do so.
- **Quickly providing Veteran housing with supportive services.** Since SSVF does not have a disability determination requirement, agencies could use it as a bridge resource to house Veterans quickly. This was followed by transition to permanent supportive housing for those needing it, as units became available. As SSVF has a five-month limit for rental assistance, SSVF and permanent supportive housing providers had to coordinate closely.

C. Acceleration and Streamlining of Existing Operational Processes

Several of the most valuable Mayors Challenge innovations sped up existing processes within and among homeless-serving organizations. This section discusses the most important of these measures.

- **Relying on a day-to-day implementation coordinator.** Relying on a day-to-day implementation coordinator. UNITY of Greater New Orleans, the CoC convener, acted as the backbone of the 2014 effort, coordinating the overall implementation of the Mayors Challenge on a day-to-day basis. UNITY's critical role included keeping shared lists of homeless Veterans and affordable units, documenting progress, and keeping stakeholders up to date.



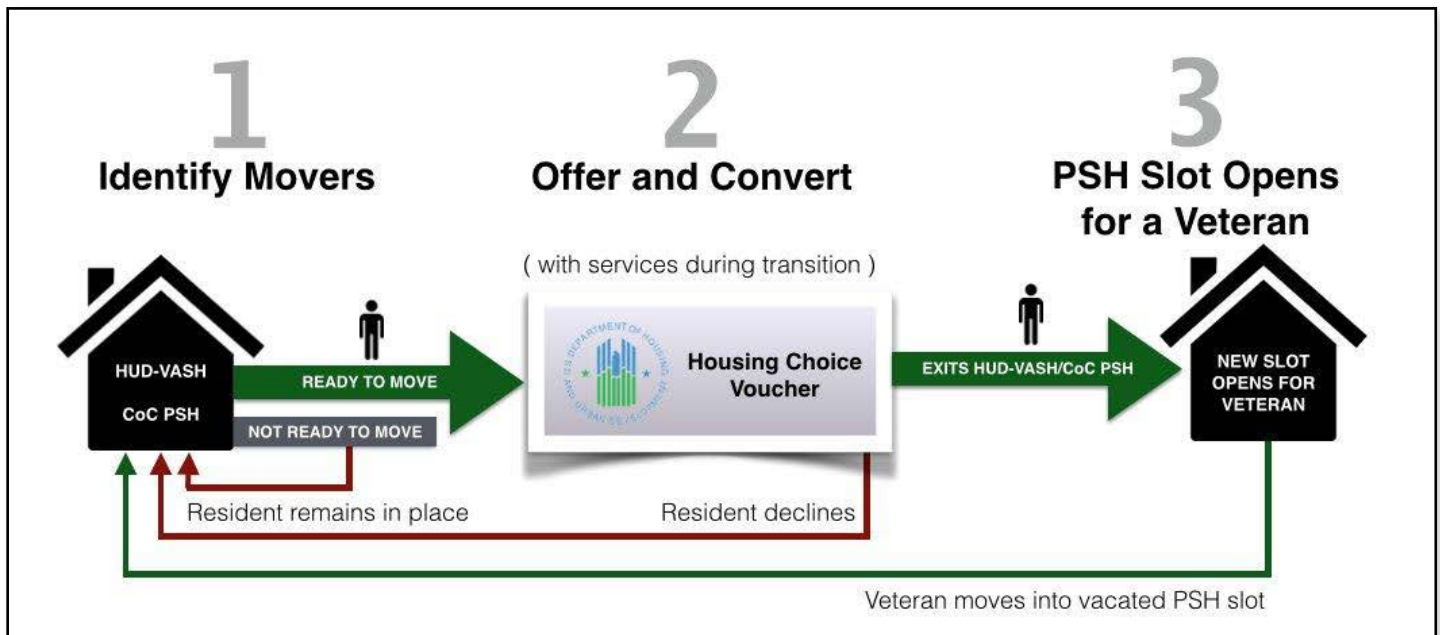
- **Creating and using a master list.** To track progress accurately, the partners created a separate master list of Veterans who were homeless, which they could work on collaboratively.
 - The list, updated daily by UNITY, tracked for each individual:
 - When the Veteran was found by the outreach team
 - When the VA confirmed the person's Veteran status
 - Whether the Veteran was eligible for VA assistance (based on discharge status)
 - Whether the Veteran had been formally assessed (regardless of eligibility)
 - If the Veteran had been offered housing
 - If the Veteran had moved into a unit and, if so, what type of housing

The providers faced several issues in developing procedures for working with the master list.

- **Defining who should be on the list.** The master list began with all Veterans found in the 2014 January PIT count plus the Homeless Management Information System (HMIS) list of those sleeping on the streets or in shelter. Newly identified homeless Veterans who later became homeless during the year were added daily, whether or not they were eligible for VA assistance. The master list did not include persons who were doubled up or unstably housed. Adding Veterans to the list throughout the year, however, meant that the Mayors Challenge did not have a constant numeric goal (such as "193 Veterans housed") to be achieved by year's end, but rather a fluctuating number of veterans to house.
- **Managing the list.** Each day, information on all self-identified Veterans who had entered shelter the night before was checked with the VA to see if those persons, in fact, had served in the military for at least one day. All persons verified as Veterans were added to the master list, regardless of discharge status. As the Mayors Challenge began, several partners had access to adding/removing clients from the list, although eventually access was limited. Any housing navigator could propose changes, but each recommendation was verified by a UNITY data administrator, who alone had authorization to update the list.

- **Substituting Housing Choice Vouchers for service-enriched supportive housing subsidies.** A collaboration among the CoC, Housing Authority of New Orleans, and the VA developed new procedures for managing the city’s supply of permanent supportive housing. Providers realized that there were a number of people living in PSH (through programs such as HUD-VASH or CoC PSH), who no longer needed the array of services provided. At the same time, many of the newly identified homeless Veterans were in need of supportive housing placement. *(See Figure 3.)*

Figure 3: Rental Assistance Conversion



Providers offered PSH residents the choice of **(1)** receiving rental assistance from another funding source (such as a Housing Choice Voucher), with provision for six months of transitional case management with providers on call if the client needed services beyond that; or **(2)** remaining in place. PSH case managers identified clients as potentially ready to make the transition based on such factors as behavioral health stability and having no further need for services.

Importantly, no clients were pressured to leave a PSH unit or referred for a voucher unless they wanted this to be done. Participants, with few exceptions, did not need to move physically. Most of them retained their current apartment while swapping out the type of rent subsidy.

The housing authority, the local VA, and the CoC executed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU). The housing authority provided 200 Housing Choice Vouchers, typically through turnover, for clients ready to “graduate” from CoC or HUD-VASH permanent supportive housing. More than 60 slots opened up immediately. The State of Louisiana also made vouchers available. This solution offered more options to more clients and made available more critical supportive housing units to those who needed them.

Working through Challenges to House One Homeless Veteran



Daryl, age 28, is a Veteran who served in the Army for almost seven years, deployed to Afghanistan. He became homeless on his return. Chronically homeless and severely depressed, on October 25, 2014, he approached UNITY navigators at the VA's CRRC. A navigator verified his homeless status through a VA caseworker who had observed him sleeping outside. When referred to SSVF, however, it was discovered Daryl was no longer eligible for VA rental assistance.

The navigators worked with Daryl to gather documents needed for CoC housing assistance, including the DD214 form, disability status, and income documentation. Finding it difficult to obtain disability documentation, a UNITY social worker assessed him for mental illness and the need for supportive services. A VI-SPDAT was also completed to assess his needs.

It was clear to Daryl and the navigators that he needed the services of permanent supportive housing. They completed several applications, while Daryl chose to wait for the opening of Sacred Heart PSH allotted for Veterans. UNITY staff attempted to place him temporarily in a hotel using available city funds. Then Daryl went missing for a couple of weeks.

UNITY navigators/outreach workers found him again, and swiftly restarted the housing process. It had taken a long time to achieve, but Daryl moved into his permanent supportive housing apartment on Dec 20, 2014. (UNITY of Greater New Orleans)

- **Employing a full-time housing locator.** During the Mayors Challenge period, the CoC funded a fulltime housing locator. The locator built relationships with landlords, tracked PHA referrals to landlord resources, pre-inspected units, helped match clients to units, and showed clients a choice of units.
- **Emphasizing the housing navigator role.** Housing navigators focus on housing for the client, in every aspect of their work with and for that person. Staff funded through the CoC, SSVF and VA sources worked to integrate key aspects of the housing navigator role into their traditional duties. Navigators were committed to doing whatever it took to secure housing, from accompanying Veterans to get a birth certificate or driving them to look at different apartments. Weekly meetings of navigators discussed the individual plan for and status of each homeless Veteran. Implementation of individual plans was supported at all levels of participating organizations.

“There may be a small number of Veterans who will absolutely refuse to be housed for a very long time. Don't let that stop you from committing to ending Veteran homelessness. New Orleans had nine Veterans who repeatedly refused housing at goal's end and continued to work with them beyond the end date of the initiative.

Never give up on them, as sooner or later they will choose to come in. In one case, New Orleans outreach workers reached out to a chronically homeless Veteran 252 times before he chose to move into housing.”

– Martha Kegel, UNITY

- **Expediting housing production.** As the year 2014 opened, the CoC and government partners had been developing a 109-unit PSH project with an emphasis on housing homeless Veterans. Funding for the project came from CDBG Disaster Recovery Grants, Neighborhood Stabilization Program (NSP) grants, CoC resources, and private philanthropy.

The Sacred Heart construction project needed gap funding to ensure it would be ready to begin housing Veterans during 2014. The city quickly stepped in with the needed funds.

Ending Veteran homelessness requires a tightly targeted focus. While this can **bring success on the specific initiative**, the community should acknowledge that progress on housing other populations, such as non-Veteran chronically homeless households, may slow during that period.

- **Temporarily raising the priority of homeless Veterans.** In the last few months of 2014, the stakeholders decided to prioritize Veterans for housing placements, committing seven out of every 10 permanent supportive housing placements to Veterans during the Challenge. Towards the end of the year, placements went to homeless Veterans and only to three other groups: **(1)** non-Veteran families with children; **(2)** non-Veterans with health conditions placing them at imminent risk of dying on the streets; and **(3)** in limited cases, other chronically homeless non-Veterans with high needs.

D. Coordination and Outreach

- **Ensuring weekly focus at many levels of leadership and operations, to assess progress and make course corrections as necessary.** From the beginning of the initiative, the Office of the Mayor led weekly leadership meetings to keep all partners focused on the goal. Meetings were chaired by Tyra Johnson Brown, the Director of Planning and Resource Development for the City’s Homeless Programs in the Community Development Department. Agencies reported each week on both the total number of homeless persons and specifically, formerly homeless Veterans who had been housed. Attendees included local, state, and federal agencies and nonprofit leaders.

Making it a norm for decision makers to attend and participate actively was crucial. Taken together, these strategies and others (such as the VA speeding up eligibility determination, described later) sped up the pace of housing placement, making it possible for navigators to help a client become housed as quickly as within one day. Course corrections were instituted as stakeholders realized that the numbers were still not on target to achieve success by the end of the year.

Weekly meetings between the housing locator and housing navigators allowed for real-time status tracking, distribution of updated lists of available apartments, and provision of progress reports to each navigator’s supervisor.

Have the right people at the table

The Mayors Challenge brought people to the leadership table that could make decisions, commit resources, and agree to course corrections. This level of engagement is critical; not having key leaders present and actively would inevitably create delays and frustrate progress.

- **Providing weekly newsletter updates.**

The initiative sent weekly email newsletters, keeping involved parties apprised of overall progress (see **Figure 4**). Progress was visualized through a graphic thermometer that showed the current numbers of Veterans housed. Each newsletter also provided success stories on how initiative partners helped individual Veterans to end their homelessness.

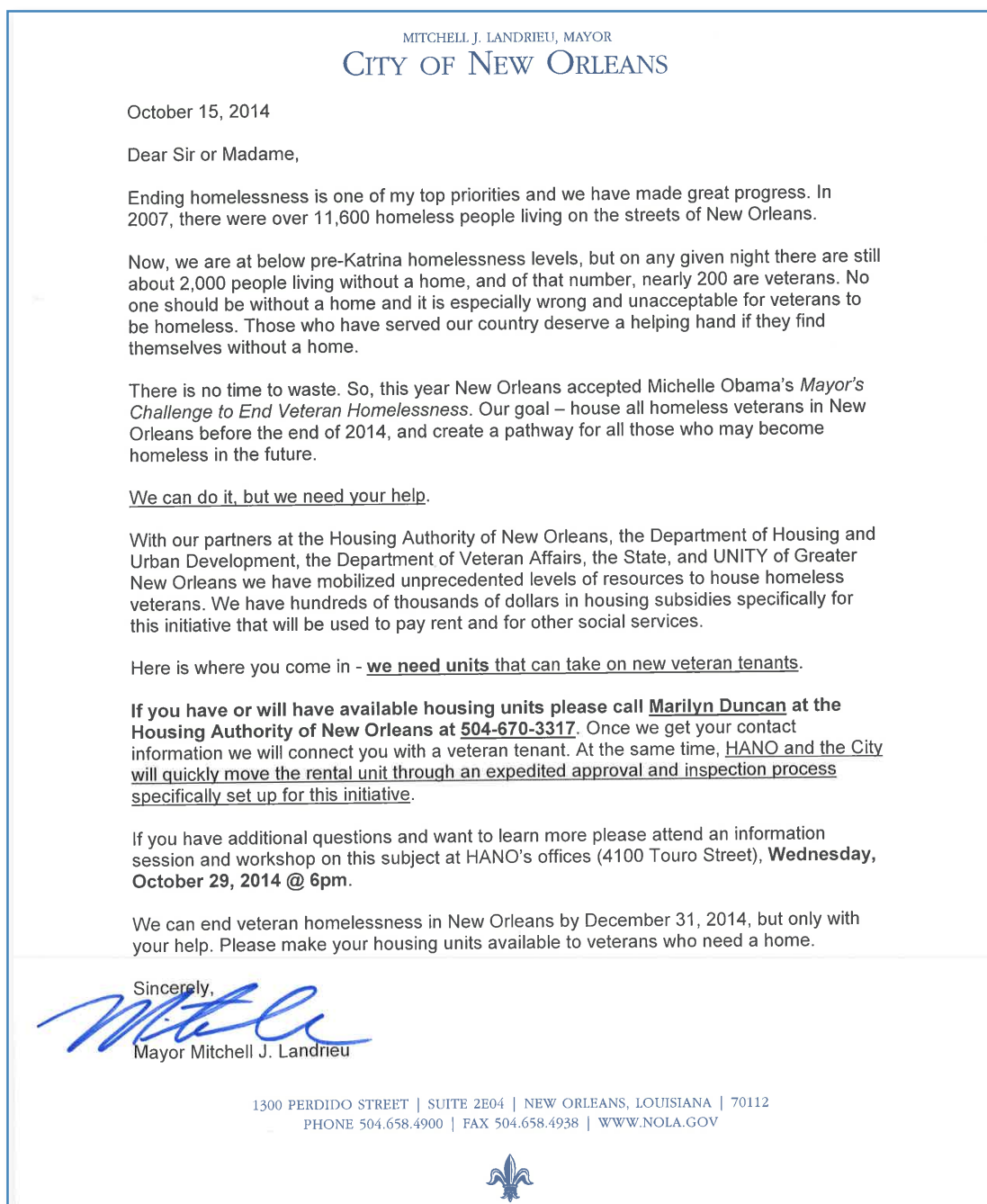
Figure 4: E-newsletter, Jan. 7, 2015



- **Using new forms of active outreach to landlords.** The housing authority organized a special outreach effort to landlords, including some who had never worked with the housing authority before. The authority distributed a letter, signed by the Mayor, asking property owners with available units to come forward and help end Veteran homelessness in the city (*see Figure 5*). A special briefing, led by the mayor's aide, welcomed them. Nearly 60 landlords attended the meeting; some landlords were veterans themselves and felt a real desire to help this group.

In addition, the CoC actively sought out new landlords, making many cold calls to individuals and meeting with them in person. The CoC shared these new contacts with the VA and CoC provider agencies. Publicity about the campaign also spurred many property owners to contact the CoC to participate.

Figure 5: Mayor's Outreach Letter to Property Owners

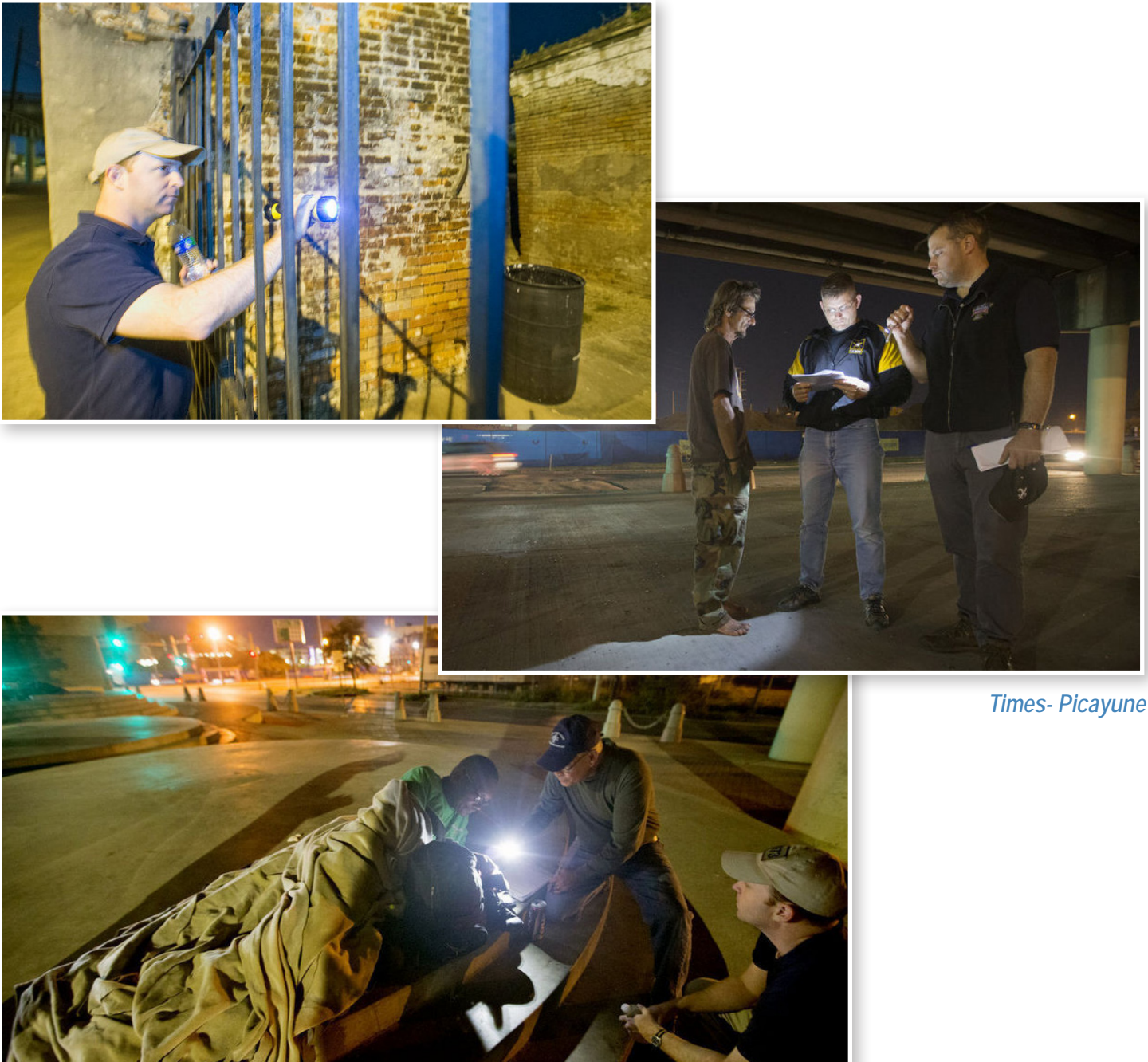


- **Making greater use of military and Veteran service organization volunteers.** The Mayors Challenge carried out several activities with volunteers from organizations associated with the military. (See **Table 3.**)

Table 3: Day-to-Day Work with Military Partners	
Involving military groups	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sought volunteers from Mayor’s longstanding military advisory group and the VFW • Consulted with homelessness stakeholders on how to make best use of military partner’s great interest
Identifying primary role for military volunteers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Chose street outreach as the best fit • Established special military volunteer outreach two nights per month, providing orientation and support for volunteers
Teaming military volunteers with regular outreach workers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Visited locations where experienced workers knew Veterans might frequent • Active duty military volunteered outside of working hours
Connecting through shared military experience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All military volunteers (including VFW) wore caps and shirts with insignia telling military affiliation (active duty military could not wear uniforms during outreach) • Started conversations by asking where homeless Veterans had been stationed and who drill their instructor had been to quickly confirm they were veterans and gain trust
Holding a Veterans Day move-in	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Helped five homeless Veterans move into housing
Tapping CoC and community resources for household goods	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Veterans selected household items at CoC furniture warehouse • Offices of federal departments donated items (by way of the Federal Executive Board) • Public employees supplied approximately \$10,000 in Home Start Up Kits for Public Service Recognition Week

The Mayors Challenge initiated twice-per-month city-wide outreach nights, making it possible to send as many as seven teams of four to five persons each during the nights when military people were participating. (See **Figure 6.**) Military and VFW volunteers met at the CRRC for a briefing on Veteran homelessness and were teamed with experienced outreach workers. This greatly supplemented the resources available over the previous practice of having one to two person outreach teams trying to cover the entire city. Each military branch solicited volunteers and, in the end, 150 individuals participated.

Figure 6: Night time Outreach to Homeless Veterans



Times- Picayune

E. Mid-Course Corrections Were Crucial

Leadership and operational staff were tracking progress closely, and in several key areas they determined that more needed to be done—at a systemic level, at a program level, and at an individual level—to reach the goal by the end of the year.

Mid-Course Corrections

- Pre-inspection of units by UNITY housing locator enabled extremely quick move-in
- Acceleration of inspections (up to three times a day) for a major supportive housing project as units came on line
- Implementation of an individual housing plan for each Veteran was supported at all levels of participating organizations
- Senior CoC leaders (referred to affectionately as “Grand Pooh Bahs”), assigned to work with individual housing navigators, made certain that each Veteran was housed as quickly as possible
- Shift to prioritize placement for Veterans in supportive housing: seven of every 10 placements made went to homeless Veterans

“The key is to work through barriers. If you can’t work through it, find a way around it. Have a Plan B, Plan C and Plan D if the barrier is immovable.”

– Martha Kegel, *UNITY*

F. Taking Stock at Year’s End, and Beyond

At the close of 2014, the New Orleans effort had housed 227 Veterans and reached “functional zero.” At that time, nine Veterans continued to refuse housing.

As of July 2015 five of these Veterans had been permanently housed, with homeless-serving agencies still working with the last four. Including these four, a total of 72 more Veterans have been housed since January 2015. Today, New Orleans commits to housing newly homeless Veterans within an average of 30 days. As of April 2015, the median length of homelessness had shortened to just 15 days.

3. SUSTAINING SYSTEM INNOVATIONS



Stakeholders in New Orleans continue to use a number of Mayors Challenge innovations. (See Table 4.)

Table 4: Continuing Use of Mayors Challenge Innovations	
Leadership meetings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leadership meetings continue on a monthly basis • Help ensure identification of emerging issues in homeless community • Make future course corrections easier
Night time street outreach	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Workers who identify newly homeless Veterans take responsibility as housing navigators • Day shift workers carry out much of the issue resolution
Quarterly street outreach using military volunteers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Comprehensive outreach nights, supplemented with military volunteers, continue on quarterly basis
Emergency shelter outreach	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shelter staff collect and enter basic information on clients daily • UNITY ensures that SSVF connects with newly identified Veterans • SSVF workers visit shelters daily and conduct VI-SPDAT assessments, gather documentation of Veteran status, work with those eligible for VA benefits to overcome barriers to housing, and refer those not eligible to CoC agencies
Speedier determination of Veteran status	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • VA is committed to continue verifying Veteran status and eligibility for VA benefits for each individual in about one day
Mainstreaming housing resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Housing providers continue to identify candidates for “graduation” among people living in permanent supportive housing who no longer need the array of services • Change of subsidy is a voluntary choice of client • Housing Choice Vouchers, pledged but unused in Mayors Challenge, form a continuing resource
Regularly updated master list	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • UNITY keeps master list of homeless individuals up to date • Homeless veterans identified are tracked and housed

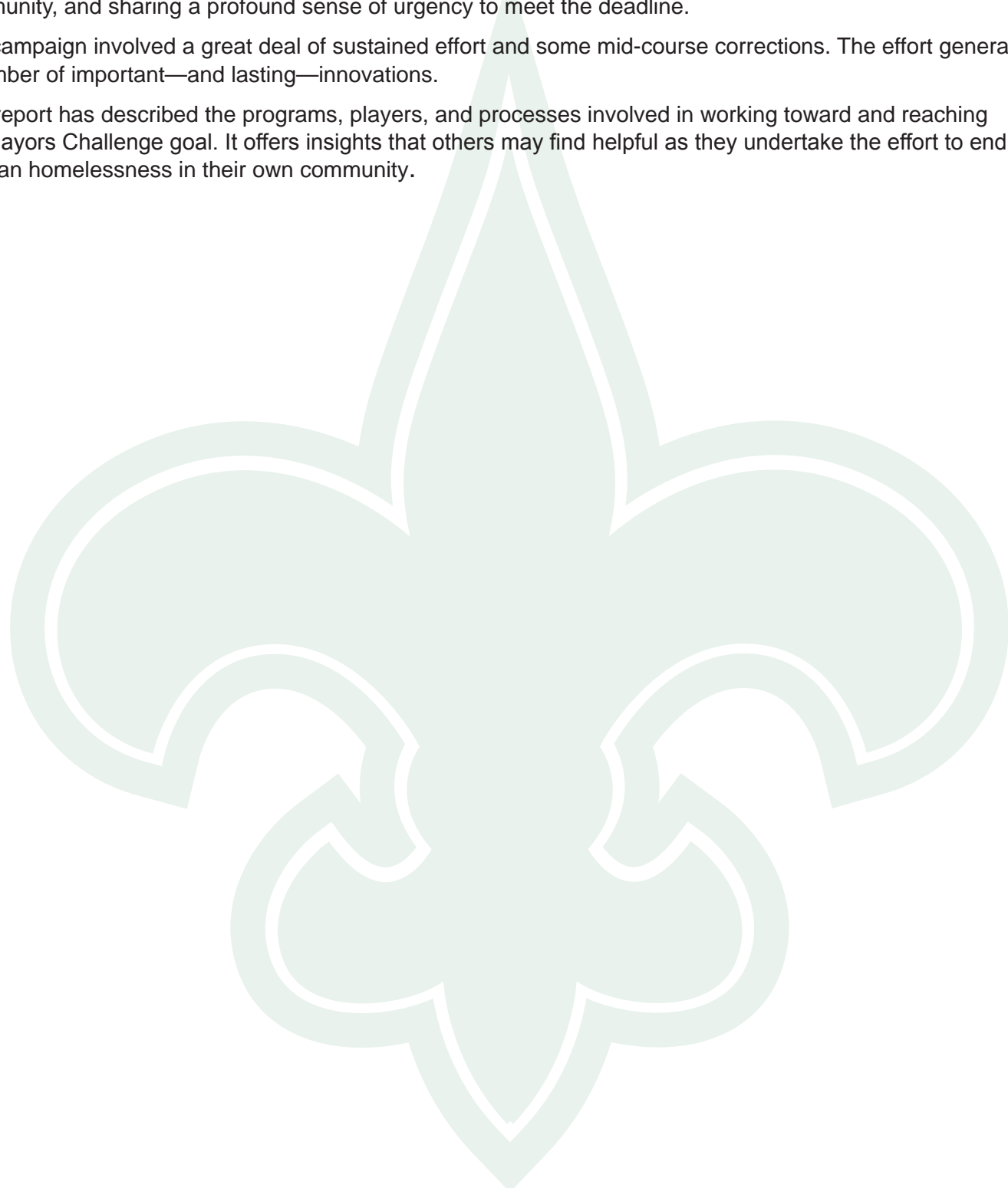
4. CONCLUSION



New Orleans was spurred towards its goal in the Mayors Challenge to End Veteran Homelessness by a few key factors. These included having a passionate and exacting leader, building on existing strengths in the community, and sharing a profound sense of urgency to meet the deadline.

The campaign involved a great deal of sustained effort and some mid-course corrections. The effort generated a number of important—and lasting—innovations.

This report has described the programs, players, and processes involved in working toward and reaching the Mayors Challenge goal. It offers insights that others may find helpful as they undertake the effort to end Veteran homelessness in their own community.



APPENDIX: PARTICIPATING PROVIDERS

The following are New Orleans homelessness service providers whose contributions were integral to operating the housing and services for the Mayors Challenge to End Veteran Homelessness initiative:

Navigation and Outreach

- Harry Tompson Center – Day center
- Hope Center – SSVF
- New Orleans Mission – Shelter
- Ozanam Inn – Shelter
- Resources for Human Development - Jefferson Parish Outreach – Street Outreach
- Start Corporation – SSVF and CoC RRH
- Travelers Aid Society – Outreach
- UNITY of Greater New Orleans – Outreach, coordinated entry staffing, data management, coordination
- U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) – Outreach
- ViaLink – HMIS, shelter data
- Volunteers of America – SSVF and CoC outreach

Navigation and Outreach

- Salvation Army
- Ozanam Inn
- New Orleans Mission
- Volunteers of America Grants and Per Diem at Napoleon
- Resources for Human Development – Womanspace Safe Haven
- Project Lazarus

CoC-Funded Permanent Supportive Housing (PSH) and Rapid Re-Housing (RRH) Programs That Housed Veterans during the Mayors Challenge

- Bridge House PSH
- Easter Seals PSH
- Catholic Charities - Health Guardians (at UNITY's Sacred Heart Apartments)
- Catholic Charities Ciara House PSH
- DePaul USA RRH
- First Evangelist Housing Magnolia Villa PSH
- Harry Tompson Center RRH
- Jefferson Parish Human Services Authority
- Jerusalem Economic Development Corporation (JEDC) Housing (with Hope Center)
- Metropolitan Human Services District (Shelter Plus Care)
- National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) New Orleans
- Odyssey House Louisiana
- Project Lazarus
- Responsibility House PSH
- Resources for Human Development - Pathways PSH
- Resources for Human Development - Womanspace
- Shelter Resources (at UNITY's Williams Building)
- Start Corporation RRH
- Travelers Aid PSH
- UNITY PSH MLK/LaSalle PSH
- Volunteers of America PSH

GLOSSARY OF ACRONYMS

The following are New Orleans homelessness service providers whose contributions were integral to operating the housing and services for the Mayors Challenge to End Veteran Homelessness initiative:

CDBG – Community Development Block Grant (HUD)

CoC – Continuum of Care

CRRC – VA Community Resource and Referral Center

HMIS – Homeless Management Information Systems

HUD – U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development

HUD-VASH – HUD-VA Supportive Housing program

PATH – Projects for Assistance in Transition from Homelessness

PIT – HUD’s annual Homeless Point-in-Time count

PSH – HUD Permanent Supported Housing program

SSVF – Memorandum of Understanding

MOU – Memorandum of Understanding

NAMI – National Alliance on Mental Illness

NSP – Neighborhood Stabilization Program (HUD)

RDH – Resources for Human Development

RRH – Rapid Re-Housing

SNAPS – HUD’s Office of Special Needs Assistance Programs

USICH – U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness

VA – U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs

VFW – Veterans of Foreign Wars

VI-SPDAT – Vulnerability Index & Service Prioritization Decision Assistance Tool

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¹Brian Wolshon (2006). "Evacuation Planning and Engineering for Hurricane Katrina." The Bridge 36 (1). Retrieved May 30 2015 from <https://www.nae.edu/Publications/Bridge/TheAftermathofKatrina/EvacuationPlanningandEngineeringforHurricaneKatrina.aspx>

²Allison Plyer. "Facts for Features: Katrina Impact" New Orleans Community Data Center. August 2014. Retrieved May 30, 2015 from <http://www.datacenterresearch.org/data-resources/katrina/facts-for-impact/>