

COVID-19-Safe Stand Downs

A Strong COVID-19 Practice in VHA Homeless Program Operations

INTRODUCTION

The VHA Homeless Programs Office identifies and disseminates strong, emerging practices in homeless program operations during the COVID-19 National Emergency. Staff at the Hershel “Woody” Williams VA Medical Center (HWWVAMC) in Huntington, VA developed a month-long, COVID-19-safe Veteran’s Stand Down event that delivered donations and resources directly to homeless and formerly homeless Veterans in the community.

PRACTICE OVERVIEW

Prior to the COVID-19 National Emergency, [Stand Down](#) events supported by the HWWVAMC typically took place in the month of September. However, in June 2020, three months into the global pandemic, it became clear that their traditional September Stand Down activities would not be feasible given the Center for Disease Control’s (CDC) COVID-19 [considerations for events and gatherings](#). Recognizing the significance that Stand Downs have on both Veterans’ access to resources and their morale and emotional wellbeing, homeless program staff and the Director of Voluntary Service at HWWVAMC began to brainstorm ways to make this year’s event happen. As it would be unsafe to plan an event where hundreds Veterans converged on a single location, they committed to go out into the community and bring the Stand Down to each individual Veteran wherever they were.

HWWVAMC’s month-long, COVID-19-safe Stand Down centered on resource bags, representing portable versions of the donations and resources Veterans would receive and access during an in-person event. Each bag contained VA-branded cloth face masks, hand sanitizer bottles with the telephone number to VA’s crisis line, brass hands-free door openers, insulated cooler bags, \$10 gift cards to a local restaurant, fresh fruit, and information on area resources. Non-VA branded items were obtained through donations from Voluntary Service. Bags were then customized to include additional items for individual Veterans based on their unique needs and living situations. Department of Defense (DoD) surplus items were included in the bags depending on the needs of Veterans.

As the event organizers only had access to 400 units of personal protective equipment (PPE) to include in the resource bags, they capped the “Stand Down participants” at 400 Veterans. During the month of September 2020, their goal was to distribute 100 bags per week throughout the tristate area (West Virginia, Kentucky, Ohio). Concretely, they planned to have all of the basic resource bags stocked prior September 1, 2020 and would then customize the bags for individual Veterans during the week before delivery.



Veterans were identified using the HOMES Operational Reports (OR) 6: Pre-Assessments and Assessments Completed and 7: Current Census, local by-name lists, and client rosters from Supportive Services for Veteran Families (SSVF) and other community homeless services. A Delivery Request Form (included in the Supporting Documents section below) was developed for use by VA and community-partner case managers to help determine Veteran needs such as food insecurity, sanitation, transportation, clothing sizes, and other elements.

The resource bags were assembled in a second floor conference room at the homeless program's main office. While wearing appropriate PPE per their facility's operating procedures, staff took turns assembling bags, with no more than two to three staff in the conference room at a time. Completed bags were brought down to a first-floor office to be staged for customization and delivery. Gift card distribution was tracked using a log documenting which Veteran benefited from the donation. As the Delivery Request Form also included space for each Veterans' delivery address, once customization was complete, it was able to be stapled to each bag as a label. The form would later be removed from the bag upon delivery as an ad-hoc receipt.

When September 2020 arrived, distribution of the bags commenced. The planning team coordinated with the various VA and community-partner case managers to ensure that resource bags were delivered to their intended recipients. Homeless program leads emphasized that flexibility in delivery logistics was critical as case managers often experienced challenges delivering bags during the intended scheduled week. Regardless, by early October, all 400 resource bags were delivered. The response was overwhelmingly positive by Veterans, the Medical Center Director, and with the public. Not only did the Veterans appreciate the resource bags, but the event itself was an important opportunity to raise Veteran awareness of critical VA and community services while also keeping them engaged in care.

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