



Vital Mission: Ending Homelessness Among Veterans
MEDIA CAMPAIGN: TIPS AND TOOLS

Below is information to enhance your work with reporters during the November 10 media release of the data update on *Vital Mission: Ending homelessness Among Veterans*. It includes answers to reporter's popular questions, ideas for successfully "pitching" your story to the press, and helpful hints for getting media outlets to pay attention.

Key Questions and Answers

Veterans and veterans homelessness have been getting a fair amount of media coverage recently. Among the angles being discussed are women veterans, veterans from our current conflicts abroad, and Secretary Shinseki's recent pledge to end veterans homelessness in five years.

In light of these popular topics, below are some questions you may likely be asked about veterans homelessness:

Reporter's Question: Are there more females coming home from our current conflicts that are facing homelessness? Is the VA prepared to handle challenges specific to female homeless veterans?

Possible response: As females make up a greater and greater number of the armed forces, it follows that there will be more and more female veterans. To illustrate that point: According to American Community Survey data, only 3 percent of veterans age 55+ are women, but 18 percent of veterans age 18 – 34 are women. Women do have a specific set of challenges to overcome when returning home from conflicts: they are more likely to have children and lower incomes, and are more likely to have Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), and pay too much for their income on rent, putting them at higher risk of becoming homeless. The VA has an opportunity to ready itself for those challenges by improving prevention services, affordable housing, and medical and behavioral health services for veterans.

Reporter's Question: Are more veterans coming home with emotional and physical disability from our current conflicts? Is this leading to greater rates of homelessness among younger veterans?

Possible Response: In 2007, the Alliance reported that mental and physical disabilities are very prevalent among veterans—at that time VA reports suggested that nearly 45 percent of homeless veterans suffer from mental illness. Studies from the Journal of the American Medical Association suggest that veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan may face high risks of homelessness because of mental health problems: 19 percent of Iraq veterans reported a mental health problem, compared with 11. Three percent for those returning from Afghanistan.

Moreover, current veterans are coming back into a country with historically high unemployment rates and a depressed economy. An inability to find employment – combined with reported increases in severe physical injuries experienced by younger veterans – increases the risk of homelessness.

Reporter's Question: What is the Secretary proposing to do about veterans homelessness? How is he preparing/planning to end veterans homelessness in five years?

Possible Response: The Secretary has not yet published a 5 year plan for ending homelessness. However, Congress is exploring legislative solutions to the problem. In order to truly end homelessness Congress must pass comprehensive legislation to create a homelessness prevention and rapid re-housing program, expand supportive housing options, and increase the supply of affordable housing for veterans.

Ideas for pitching to the press

Below are ideas for pitching (selling) your story to reporters to increase your chance of getting it published.

- **Offer an exclusive.** Do you have a reporter with whom you have – or would like to make – a connection? Call them up and offer them first dibs on the story. The prospect of getting an exclusive scoop or early access to a piece of information might incentivize a reporter to cover a story he might not otherwise have been interested in.
- **Consider local angels of the story.** What does this issue mean for providers in your area? Is there a service provider in your town who has been successful at preventing or ending veterans homelessness? Does your town have a particularly high rate of homelessness? Or does your town have a particularly high rate of enlisted men and women (potential veterans)? Maybe a local community leader or elected official is a veteran – what does he/she think? Reporters love local stories!
- **Use media to get results.** Make reporters aware of policy solutions to homelessness and call on elected officials to take action (See the Alliance's *Ending Veterans Homelessness: Key Policy Priorities*). Make sure to describe how the policy change would impact local veterans and providers.
- **Offer something special.** Offer them a tour of a local program that has been successful at re-housing veterans who become homeless or an interview with a veteran (and / or their family) who has experienced homelessness.
- **Collaborate.** Spread your message by partnering with other organizations with a vested interest in ending homelessness. Ask your colleagues to send a similar press release to their media contact.

Helpful hints

- Never let your press release be longer than a page.
- Include the release in the body of your email – do not use attachments.
- Use short, pithy headers and subheads
- Make your announcement in the first paragraph of your press release. If you make reporters wade through the first couple of paragraphs, they might lose interest.
- Do your homework. The best way to find the right reporter to cover your story is to read your local papers and find out who's writing about the subject (homelessness, veterans). You greatly improve your chances of getting your story covered if you pitch it to the right person.

- Do not ignore bloggers – your local paper likely has a blog and blogger. They're great for brief articles and/or event coverage. Try pitching them a quick, human interest angle of your story.