



# Best Practices in Serving Veterans

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Veterans of the United States armed forces are disproportionately likely to be homeless. The vast majority of homeless veterans are single males and many come from poor, disadvantaged backgrounds. Half of homeless veterans are experiencing mental illness, and more than two-thirds struggle with substance use and addiction.<sup>1</sup> Providing services to formerly homeless veterans requires an understanding, not only of these issues, but also of those that are directly related to veterans' experience in the military.

In designing and delivering services to veterans in supportive housing, observe the following principles to ensure you meet the needs of this group.

## *Understand the Impact of Military Service*

For many homeless veterans, their service in the military (whether during wartime or not) and their re-entry into the civilian world define their life experiences. Their military service plays a powerful role in shaping their adult identity and their sense of place within the community. Therefore, it is important to design services that respect and value the contributions that veterans have made, and is responsive to their particular needs. Many veterans' service organizations place a strong emphasis on incorporating peer-to-peer (veteran-to-veteran) support models to help ensure that their services reflect a thorough understanding of veterans' experiences.

## *Facilitate Access to Veteran-Specific Public Benefits*

Many veterans, especially those who did not serve during wartime, are unaware of or have not accessed VA pension or health care benefits. These resources, and other public benefits, can provide critical support to formerly homeless veterans living in supportive housing.

## *Understand the Prevalence of Specific Mental Illnesses*

Veterans come from all walks of life, and can be expected to experience mental illnesses at rates proportional to the general population. However, the experience of military service, especially during wartime, may make veterans especially vulnerable to some mental health issues, such as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.

## *Understand the Prevalence of Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI)*

According to a report in the *New England Journal of Medicine*, one-quarter of soldiers evacuated from Iraq and Afghanistan have suffered serious head and neck trauma.<sup>2</sup> Symptoms of traumatic brain injury, which is correlated with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, can be hard to detect. Symptoms vary widely but may include poor concentration, lack of organization, difficulty making decisions, slowed thinking, memory deficits, headaches, dizziness, fatigue, impulsivity, irritability and sleep problems.<sup>3</sup> Since some of these symptoms may be similar to symptoms of mental illness (such as depression) or may appear to be the consequences of substance abuse, it is important for

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<sup>1</sup> National Coalition for Homeless Veterans website: [http://nchv.org/index.php/news/media/background\\_and\\_statistics/](http://nchv.org/index.php/news/media/background_and_statistics/) (accessed August 2013).

<sup>2</sup> Hoge C.W., MCGurk, D., Thomas, J.L., et al. (2008). "Mild Traumatic Brain Injury in U.S. Soldiers Returning from Iraq", *New England Journal of Medicine*, 358(5), 453–463.

<sup>3</sup> Health Care for the Homeless, Healing Hands Clinicians Network. "Traumatic Brain Injury: Emerging Tools for Assessment and Care."(2008) [www.nhchc.org](http://www.nhchc.org).



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veterans to receive an assessment for TBI, in order to ensure that they receive appropriate treatment.

### *Provide Employment Services*

Providers of supportive services for veterans often focus on employment, since veterans report that unemployment is one of their primary challenges. Employment can play a key role in ending homelessness, by helping veterans gain self-respect and a sense of purpose, generating income that can assist them to pay for housing and other necessities. Best practices for employment services include: offering numerous and varied job opportunities, including opportunities to start working right away; tailoring job duties to create a mutually beneficial situation for employers and veterans with disabilities; and offering ongoing job retention supports to veterans.

The [Project Profiles](#) section of CSH's Quality Supportive Housing Toolkit includes existing supportive housing projects that are serving veterans and have designed their services with the needs of that population in mind.