

Veterans Committee Meeting Minutes - 3/14/24

In attendance: Linda Candage, VA (employment coordinator), Steve Connor, Central Hampshire Veterans Services, Shaundell Diaz, Three County CoC, Gumersindo Gomez, Bilingual Veterans Center, Patrick Gore, Becki Grimsley, Mike Hagmaier, Soldier On, Michele LaFleur, Three County CoC, Ann Lentini, Domus Inc., Dan Nye, Central Hampshire Veterans, Pamela Schwartz, WMNEH, Bill St. Denis, Veterans Inc, Uri Strauss, Community Legal Aid, Kate Sweetster-Owens, VA HUD-VASH

Staffing announcement: Steve Connor of Central Hampshire Veterans Services is leaving his position at the end of May to join the Peace Corps and work in Ghana for 27 months. GO STEVE!!! We thanked him for his 20 years of work in this

Governor's Plan to End Veteran Homelessness:

We discussed the Governor's announcement to invest \$20 million of remaining ARPA funds in ending veteran homelessness (see the [Governor's press release](#)). The first RFR is already out for its outreach and stabilization services (HOPE - Homeless Outreach and Placement Effort), modeled after the SSVF program. It will target 3-5 communities, including western and central MA as one community. Veterans Inc, Soldier On and Domus Inc are all applying from this region (and maybe more - these are the orgs on this call). There will be subsequent RFRs focusing on capital investment, both soft and hard money for veteran housing development.

Disappointment was noted over the lack of any funding allocation for longstanding state Veterans Services Offices (which do the work of housing stabilization). Also noted is the ongoing effort to change eligibility for Chapter 115 benefits to allow more veterans to be eligible - this did not happen through this initiative but conversations continue with Secretary Augustus on this point.

Three County CoC Update:

- 36 veterans on by-names list, 18 new veterans on the list since the start of 2024
- see additional data [here](#) (thanks to Michele for providing)

Hampden County CoC Update: not available today

Program Updates:

- Ann Lentini announced that Domus Inc is purchasing a building in Westfield that will be converted into 18 SROs for veterans - slated to be ready by 2025 - will also include support services in the building
- VA is hiring nurse and other staff support for project based housing (e.g., Agawam) as soon as the VA hiring freeze is lifted - this will be a great advance for quality of care
- Community Legal Aid veterans project continues to provide legal services for veterans, primarily around housing and benefits. Referrals are through the VA but if a provider has a question on possible referral they can contact Uri Strauss at ustrauss@cla-ma.org (no direct calls from veterans, please).

- Gumersindo Gomez announced a May 4 Town Hall meeting at Holyoke Memorial Hall to discuss Agent Orange and the PACT Act. Also starting to work on a caregivers town hall to address their needs.

Network Policy and Budget Updates:

- The Affordable Homes Act (the housing bond bill) was reported favorably out of the Housing Committee. Next step is Bonding Committee. You can read more about what it all means at the [Network blog post here](#).
- The state FY25 budget continues to make its way through the process. Currently the Joint House and Ways Means Committee is holding hearings - the House will release its budget in April. The Network held meetings with legislators in February to discuss [Network housing and homelessness priorities](#) and will continue to advocate for them.
- The Network is holding its 8th Annual Gathering on Friday, May 31, 10 am, at Holyoke Community College. See the [Save the Date flyer here](#) and [please register here!](#)

Next quarterly meeting date: June 13, 11 am