

**Central Arkansas VHS – STAY (Safety & Support; Transition & Treatment; Advocacy & Accountability; say Yes to permanent housing, and Yield not to homelessness) Program for Community Integration and Housing Retention**

An Innovative Practice in VHA Homeless Program Operations

**White Paper**

**VA**



**U.S. Department  
of Veterans Affairs**

Developed by  
**VHA National Homeless Program Office**

## INTRODUCTION

The VHA Homeless Program Office identifies and disseminates innovative practices in homeless program operations. The Central Arkansas Veterans Healthcare System (CAVHS) has been identified as a site with an innovative practice for their comprehensive community integration and housing retention program.

## PRACTICE OVERVIEW

### **Community partnerships that support ongoing community integration activities lead to excellent housing retention outcomes for Veterans participating in permanent supportive housing.**

Homeless programs across VA recognize that connecting Veterans to safe, affordable housing is the first step in what is often a long journey towards housing stability. Unfortunately, a wide range of factors can contribute to Veterans losing or leaving their housing prematurely. While some of these factors include barriers to treatment for substance use or mental health concerns, other factors include challenges in successful community integration. This is especially true for Veterans participating in the Housing and Urban Development-VA Supportive Housing (HUD-VASH) Program, who can not only experience losses of social interaction soon after moving into housing, but can also have difficulty developing ties to their new neighborhoods. This can further be exacerbated when Veterans have limited or fixed income, making many opportunities for social contact financially prohibitive. Although these challenges are familiar to homeless program staff across VA, in 2011, staff at the CAVHS HUD-VASH Program faced an added challenge to housing retention. Their healthcare system featured a homeless domiciliary that regularly attracted Veterans from around the country. Many of the Veterans exiting the domiciliary eventually obtained housing in Little Rock, AR through the HUD-VASH program. However, since most Veterans were not originally from Arkansas, few stayed in housing longer than a year. Brainstorming ways to encourage Veterans to stay in the community, the innovative staff at CAVHS developed the STAY program, a comprehensive community integration and housing retention solution. Open to men, women, and families with children, the program incentivizes Veterans to stay in their housing in Little Rock by providing monthly community engagement opportunities and public recognition for reaching housing milestones.

The program started in April 2011 after a series of grants were awarded to the CAVHS homeless program by the National Center on Homelessness among Veterans, the Department of Housing and Urban Development's Emergency Solutions Grant via the St. Francis House, the North Little Rock Chapter of the Scipio A. Jones National High School Alumni Association, and the Pro Duffers, Inc. Southwest chapter's Annual Golf Fund. The homeless program leads planned to use the funds to develop incentives in the form of household goods and supplies for Veterans participating in HUD-VASH. As the STAY program asked that Veterans commit to living in Little Rock for at least two years, these incentives were awarded when

Veterans reached six-month, one-year, and two-year housing milestones. Participation and housing retention rates were informally tracked using an Excel spreadsheet. Nine homeless program social work and peer support staff volunteer to organize the activities and events, on top of their standard job duties. These volunteers help keep Veterans engaged and informed of the different opportunities through mailed event flyers, telephone call notices, and postings at the VDTC.

To help Veterans feel invested and connected to the STAY program, as part of their Vet-to-Vet peer engagement process, the CAVHS homeless program held a design contest to develop STAY branded t-shirts. The final design chosen was created by the son of a female Veteran in residential treatment at the time. Initially, engagement opportunities focused on services offered by components of the VA Comprehensive Homeless Center of Excellence located at the Veterans Day Treatment Center (VDTC). Each month, therapeutic and educational programming was offered on topics including self-esteem, substance treatment, relaxation, housing, budgeting, homeownership, and low-income meal preparation. However, as time went on, new opportunities were developed and annual meetings were established so that Veterans could provide feedback on and advocate for events that could be offered each year. Many of the STAY program's new activities were financially supported, in part, by annual donations from the Southwest Chapter of the Pro-Duffers Golf Club and the Scipio A. Jones High School Alumni Association.

*“The STAY program is important because Veterans in HUD-VASH often have difficulty socializing. They may also have limited income and few friends in the area. STAY gives Veterans opportunities to make friends and participate in events in the community.”*  
**Michelle Martin, LCSW**  
**HUD-VASH Lead**  
**Central Arkansas Veterans**  
**Healthcare System.**

In 2013, the STAY program enrolled in the City of Little Rock's Adopt-A-Street Program and adopted a street next to the homeless program's VDTC. A sign honoring the STAY program marked the location that STAY participants would help keep clean six times a year. To aid the families in the STAY program, an annual back-to-school event provided their children with backpacks and school supplies. In 2014, two healthy eating programs were developed. The "Cook Smart/Eat Smart" program, facilitated by VA staff, taught Veterans how to prepare inexpensive meals. The community run "Green Grocers" program featured local farmers who improved Veterans' access to fresh vegetables. In 2016, Garden and Bike Clubs were formed. The Garden Club was established through partnerships with the Levy Church of Christ, who donated land for use as a community garden, along with other community vendors who donated the necessary gardening supplies and equipment. Veterans who worked in the community garden could receive up to 150 dollars in fresh produce each year. The Bike Club was established in partnership with Recycle Bikes for Kids, Inc. Veterans who volunteered twice a month to build and repair children's bicycles would receive a 10-dollar credit towards a bicycle for themselves. The bicycles

built were then donated to children in need while Veterans who earned enough credits to obtain bicycles of their own could use them on various trails near the Arkansas River, providing opportunities to exercise and enjoy the State's natural treasures.

The golf fund continues to support meals for some of the monthly STAY meetings. However, thanks to the generosity of local churches and vendors, as of 2017, STAY is no longer solely dependent on financial support from the annual Pro Duffers Southwest golf tournament, freeing-up most of those funds for addressing housing and other needs of Veterans who are homeless in Little Rock. These partnerships have also expanded educational programming at the VDTC, provided Christmas parties and summer picnics, and secured donated tickets to baseball games, water parks, and the zoo. In 2018, STAY organizers helped Veterans sign-up for the Department of Education's Upward Bound TRIO Program to encourage enrollment and attendance in college. Participants received a stipend of 40 dollars each month, as they work toward an associate's degree, and many Veterans hope to go on to get their bachelor's degree at the local colleges.

**Since April 12, 2011, 126 participants have stayed in HUD-VASH housing longer than two years, around 73 percent of all STAY participants. Ten Veterans have purchased their own homes. Today, around 34 percent of HUD-VASH participating Veterans are enrolled in STAY.** To further celebrate Veterans staying in their homes, STAY began hosting awards ceremonies where Veterans who passed six-month, one-year, two-year, and now five-year housing milestones receive plaques at the quarterly Community Homeless Assessment, Local Education and Networking Group (CHALENG) meetings. Even as Veterans graduate or move-on to home ownership, many of them continue participation in the STAY program, recognizing the value of community and the social connections they have gained.

## CONCLUSION

The STAY program has effectively fostered robust partnerships with community organizations, resulting in a wide array of engaging activities that help Veterans maintain ties to their community in ways that are both affordable and fun. We would like to thank the dedicated staff at the Central Arkansas VHS for sharing their practice with us. If you have questions about this practice, please contact Michelle Martin, LCSW, HUD-VASH Lead at [Vertie.Martin@va.gov](mailto:Vertie.Martin@va.gov) or Estella Morris, PhD, LCSW, Program Manager, Comprehensive Homeless Center of Excellence, at [Estella.Morris@va.gov](mailto:Estella.Morris@va.gov).