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White River Junction VA facility part of N.H. plan to end homelessness among veterans

By HOLLY RAMER

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CONCORD, N.H. — New Hampshire could eliminate homelessness among veterans in four years with a plan that emphasizes moving beyond housing to focus on other support services, according to report released Monday.

The state created a committee last year to identify the needs of homeless veterans and improve collaboration among the state health and human services department, community groups and the two VA medical centers that serve New Hampshire residents, including one in White River Junction.

The plan it released Monday outlines nearly a dozen goals grouped in six categories, from outreach and education to housing and employment.

Last year, 9 percent of those served by state and federally funded homeless assistance programs in New Hampshire were veterans. Those programs counted 428 veterans, but officials estimate another 200 didn't seek help. Nationally, veterans make up about 10 percent of the general population but 15 percent of the homeless population.

The plan released Monday recommends that besides helping veterans find permanent housing, the state should put more effort into expanding services that can help prevent them from becoming homeless. That includes medical and mental health treatment, along with substance abuse treatment and other support services. For example, the VA medical center in Manchester doesn't provide inpatient detoxification and relies on other programs in the community or the medical center in White River Junction.

The committee also recommends creating mental health and drug courts specifically for veterans, as numerous states have done in recent years, and expand programs that help with job training and job searches.

The number of homeless veterans in New Hampshire has declined in the last several years, in large part through the success of transitional and permanent housing programs that incorporate many of the committee's recommendations.

Harbor Homes, which provides affordable housing and support to people living with long-term mental illness or homelessness, recently opened Dalianis House in Nashua, which includes 40 transitional apartments for veterans. It opened a similar apartment building with 20 apartments in 2007. In both places, residents can stay for up to two years while they receive job training and any needed mental health and substance abuse services.

Cynthia Andreola, a spokeswoman for Harbor Homes, said the 2014 target date for ending homelessness among veterans is ambitious but doable, given the success she has seen in the Nashua area. The organization is in the early stages of planning for similar apartments in Manchester, she said.

"The reality is there are some programs out there, but because they're not as intensive, they're a little bit of a Band-Aid solution," she said. "But when we see programs of this sort that provide the tools — not just the housing — but the other supports they need to address whatever those issues were that led them to homelessness, we definitely see success," she said.

Those programs don't help if veterans aren't aware of the, however. The committee said veterans often don't know where to turn for help, and the service providers themselves don't always know what else is out there.

"Because some providers are having difficulty recognizing what resources might be available, we can assume that veterans are having the same difficulty," the committee said in recommending that the state create a resource guide for both providers and veterans.

In its report, the committee notes that its recommendations come at a crucial time: the New Hampshire National Guard and Reserves is preparing for its largest deployment in its history, with more than 700 Army and Air National Guard and 600 reservists to be deployed in the coming months. know what else is out there.

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