

# Swords to Plowshares: Tailoring Permanent Supportive Housing for Veterans

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The Department of Veterans Affairs estimates that approximately 131,000 veterans nationwide are homeless. Homelessness among veterans stems from complex and often co-occurring health and behavioral health conditions. At least 76 percent of homeless veterans have substance use or mental health problems.

Affordable housing with flexible, client-centered supportive services or permanent supportive housing has emerged as a proven intervention that can assist the most vulnerable veterans. A 2008 evaluation clearly demonstrated that veterans who received a combined intervention of housing and intensive case management (i.e., permanent supportive housing) had an 87 percent lower risk of returning to homelessness than veterans who received case management alone and a 76 percent lower risk than those who received standard care.

A good example of how PSH works for veterans is the Swords to Plowshares' Academy at the Presidio, which provides housing for 102 formerly homeless veterans in San Francisco. The Corporation for Supportive Housing awarded this project a \$75,000 loan for predevelopment activities as well as a \$10,500 grant for programming.

Services are provided on site – including crisis intervention and counseling for PTSD and other mental health disorders, addiction treatment and recovery, benefits advocacy, and employment assistance. The Academy is located near the Veterans Affairs Medical Center, where tenants receive comprehensive medical care.

On-site program staff use a harm reduction services model, which helps people modify their behaviors to reduce their risk of harm and does not consider veterans engaging in risky behaviors (e.g., substance use) to be treatment failures. Staff also use motivational interviewing techniques to help veterans reach their goals at their own pace. Building a healthy community of peers is a particular focus. Over the years, staff have learned to more actively engage tenants in community participation, believing that a “veterans helping veterans” approach is essential to success. For this population, success equals residential stability.

The outcomes are impressive. Sixty-eight percent of current residents have maintained their housing for more than 4 years, 43 percent have maintained housing for more than 6 years, and 26 percent have maintained housing for more than 8 years. Sixty percent of those who have left the Academy have positive housing stability outcomes.

Although the housing, services, and outcomes are notable, success is best measured by the impact on tenants' lives. Paul, a 51-year-old Vietnam-era veteran who has lived at the Academy since 2002, struggles with PTSD, substance abuse, and other mental health issues. Once he moved into the Academy, he was able to stabilize many aspects of his life and regain hope and self-sufficiency within a supportive veteran community. After years on and off the streets, Paul has managed to break the cycle of chronic homelessness and establish a home. “If it wasn't for Swords, I know I would be dead right now,” he says.

Swords to Plowshares is now working with the Chinatown Community Development Corporation on the development of a new 78-unit PSH project called Veterans' Commons for homeless veterans and homeless senior veterans. Michael Blecker, executive director of Swords to Plowshares and one of the founding members of the National Coalition for Homeless Veterans, believes the Academy's “success



over the past 9+ years leaves no doubt that PSH is the cost-effective answer for ending homelessness among disabled veterans with multiple barriers.” Predevelopment monies for the new project have been provided by the City of San Francisco Mayor's Office, the Local Initiative Support Corporation, and the Corporation for Supportive Housing.

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