

# **Bond Case Briefs**

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## **NLC: How Salt Lake City Solved Chronic Veteran Homelessness.**

The National League of Cities (NLC) has partnered with Mayor Ralph Becker and local stakeholders in Salt Lake City on the campaign to end chronic veteran homelessness, and has promoted the city's efforts in order to enable other cities to learn from their success. Previous posts on NLC's blog [CitiesSpeak.org](http://CitiesSpeak.org) have discussed Salt Lake City's remarkable progress towards the historic milestone of ending chronic veteran homelessness. For more information about how NLC can support efforts in your city to end chronic veteran homelessness, contact Elisha Harig-Blaine at [harig-blaine@nlc.org](mailto:harig-blaine@nlc.org).

Some time in the next few weeks Elizabeth Buehler expects to say these words: Salt Lake City has ended chronic veteran homelessness.

Buehler, the homeless services coordinator for the city, estimated that only 37 chronically homeless veterans — as identified by local shelters and other nonprofits — remained unhoused. That's down from 100, the number at the start of November. "We're going through this like gangbusters right now," Buehler says.

Overall homelessness among veterans in the United States declined by about 24 percent between 2010 and 2013, according to a November report released by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. Counts conducted in communities across the country last January found that 57,849 American veterans were homeless in 2013. About 291 of those homeless veterans resided in Utah, which marked a 13 percent decrease from the year before. (About three quarters of the state's veteran homeless population lives in Salt Lake City and the surrounding county.) "We're a part of a nationwide trend," Buehler says. "Other cities are going to follow quickly behind us."

Salt Lake City is specifically focusing on chronically homeless veterans — those who are most in need of shelter. The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) defines people as chronically homeless if they meet two criteria:

- They have a disabling condition.
- They have been continuously homeless for at least a year or experienced four episodes of homelessness within the past three years.

The fact that public officials have zeroed in on a sub-population of the homeless is part of the reason for Salt Lake City's success, says Michelle Flynn, associate executive director of The Road Home, a Utah nonprofit that serves the homeless. "It feels doable," Flynn says. "You can get your arms around it."

In an effort to raise awareness about veteran homelessness and to solicit help from landlords, Salt Lake City Mayor Ralph Becker proclaimed November "Housing Veterans Month." In response, roughly 40 landlords contacted the city to say they had units available for veterans. Becker has also engaged Phoenix Mayor Greg Stanton in a friendly competition to see whose city can end chronic veteran homelessness first.

"That's where your mayors make a big difference," says Tamara Kohler, director of Utah's

community services office. As the city leader, Becker could highlight veteran homelessness and convene important stakeholders, such as the city's public housing authority and landlords.

Salt Lake City also benefits from an especially proactive VA staff, Flynn says. In a 2012 boot camp, where public and private organizations met to discuss ways to reduce homelessness, shelter providers noted that some homeless veterans would always be reluctant to show up at the local VA hospital. In response, some VA staff decided to move their operations to a homeless shelter a couple days a week where they stood a better chance of interacting with the people who needed their help.

At least part of the explanation behind the success in ending homelessness — both in Utah and across the country — appears to be federal policy. As *Governing* reported earlier this year, President Barack Obama and Eric Shinseki, the VA secretary, pledged in 2009 to end veteran homelessness by 2015. That resulted in a major expansion of a joint HUD-VA program that provides rental-assistance vouchers for permanent housing, linked with counseling, case management and medical services through VA hospitals and community centers. Since 2008, the program has awarded 58,140 of these joint HUD-VA vouchers. Other grant programs, such as the VA's Supportive Services for Veteran Families, target veterans who are at risk of becoming homeless or who recently became homeless, providing short-term financial assistance for temporary needs, such as paying a security deposit or covering moving costs.

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