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Minnesota Mayor Announces Competition to End Veteran Homelessness.

Chris Coleman, mayor of Saint Paul, Minn., announced Jan. 24 that the Twin Cities will enter a friendly competition with other cities in an effort to eliminate veteran homelessness by 2015.

The mayors of Des Moines, Iowa, and Columbus, Ohio, will engage in a race against their Minnesota counterparts to house all veterans who meet a federal definition of long-term homelessness. The collaboration follows a similar challenge between the mayors of Phoenix and Salt Lake City last year regarding veterans who are chronically homeless. In December, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) recognized Phoenix for having reached an effective level of zero veterans who were homeless for at least one year or had experienced four episodes of homelessness in the past year.

"I have to say I'm truly inspired by what Salt Lake City and Phoenix have done," Coleman said at the U.S. Conference of Mayors winter meeting in Washington, D.C. The host city's mayor, Vincent Gray, participated in a roundtable discussion with Coleman and other mayors from around the country to discuss hunger and homelessness in cities.

As Governing previously reported, the U.S. Conference of Mayors released survey findings in December 2013 that showed some of the largest cities in the country are seeing an increased demand for emergency food assistance and an uptick in overall homelessness. One silver lining in the report, however, was declining numbers of veteran homelessness, where many surveyed cities said they were receiving federal support and successfully housing veterans.

On any given night last year, Saint Paul, Minneapolis, and their respective counties reported 183 homeless veterans, according to official point-in-time count figures published by HUD. In Des Moines and its surrounding county, the number was 130. In Columbus and its surrounding county, the number was 148. The point-in-time counts take place in January, meaning those figures are about a year old. The total veteran counts include a mix of homeless individuals sleeping at emergency shelters and those who sleep elsewhere.

"Friendly competition is a very powerful tool," said Mark Johnston, the acting assistant secretary for community planning and development at HUD. More mayors should consider following in the footsteps of Salt Lake City and Phoenix, he said. "Friendly competition motivated those mayors."

BY J.B. WOGAN | JANUARY 24, 2014