

Opinionator

Exclusive Online Commentary From The Times

Teaming Up to End Homelessness

By Tina Rosenberg

This week in Washington, people from Detroit, Tucson, New Orleans, San Diego, Atlanta and nine other cities gathered to celebrate doing the impossible. The participants share a tough job: getting homeless veterans off the street and into apartments and social services. They work in cities that have large numbers of homeless vets — but most of their cities were making only modest progress toward housing them.

Not anymore. Before the summer, San Diego was putting 14 homeless veterans a month into apartments. In the last 100 days, the monthly average more than doubled, to 32. In San Antonio, it used to take 207 days to put a newly identified homeless person in an apartment — now it's 71 days. Detroit created one-stop shopping with all the various agencies needed to house a veteran all together, and sped up its housing process from an average of 113 days to just 20.

Most cities, moreover, also greatly improved their focus on the most needy — the chronically homeless, many of whom are mentally ill or have substance abuse issues. Cities are not only moving faster, they're doing that with more difficult clients. In Atlanta, for example, only 26 percent of housing vouchers used to go to the chronically homeless. In the last 100 days, however, 93 percent go to those most vulnerable.

These cities are all participating in a campaign by a national movement of communities called the [100,000 Homes Campaign](#), which aims to get 100,000 chronically homeless or otherwise particularly vulnerable people into housing.

(They are a fifth of the way there.) **100,000 Homes supercharged the housing process this summer using [Rapid Results](#) — a strategy that helps communities jump-start projects by breaking off a 100-day chunk, setting wildly ambitious goals and using any (legal) means necessary to achieve them.**

Both of these groups are familiar to Fixes readers. My colleague David Bornstein wrote about the 100,000 Homes campaign in December 2010. That group's leaders learned about the Rapid Results Institute a year ago by reading these Fixes columns. It was a Fixes match.

There are about 67,000 homeless veterans in the United States today, and according to Mark Johnston, the acting assistant secretary for community planning and development at the Department of Housing and Urban Development, at least a third are chronically homeless. It's an enormous number in some ways — but break it down city by city, and it's manageable. Atlanta, for example, has around 850 chronically homeless vets to house: the San Diego region around 600. A big push can make a difference.

If housing the homeless is expensive, consider the cost of not housing them. The average chronically homeless person costs taxpayers \$40,000 — the price of jail, mental institutions, emergency rooms. And after that \$40,000 is spent, they are no closer to having a home. "It's less expensive to solve the problem than to perpetuate it," said Johnston.

Back in June 2011, 100,000 Homes and its Los Angeles partner, a task force started by the United Way and the Chamber of Commerce called Home for Good, convened people who worked on

housing in L.A. They played a game designed to map out every step in the cumbersome housing process — producing “a giant maze of terror,” according to Jake Maguire, 100,000 Homes’ communications director. Then they looked for every possible way to cut it down. It was successful enough that 100,000 Homes repeated it in New York City.

It helped to streamline the system — but it wasn’t enough. “We wanted not only changes in process, but lots of other changes,” said Beth Sandor, the group’s director of improvement. They were looking to create a sense of urgency, bigger goals, closer coordination, more confidence. So 100,000 Homes called Nadim Matta, who runs the Rapid Results Institute.

Because money was short and travel costs high, Rapid Results did what Matta calls a “low-touch” version of its usual program. There were three initial boot camps, in San Diego, Orlando, Fla., and Houston. But then instead of using Rapid Results coaches throughout the 100 days, the program participants used regional conference calls to coach one another. Once a month the calls included the project’s federal partners: HUD, the Department of Veterans Affairs and an interagency group called Usich.

The challenge has largely succeeded. Four cities housed more than 100 homeless veterans in 100 days. Others came close, and nearly all reported that they had found new ways of working that would speed things up in the future. Some of



Boot camp participants in Orlando map out a housing process for local homeless veterans.

the changes were improvements to the process: Atlanta, for example, had previously counted on the chronically homeless to go out and find apartments on their own. Unsurprisingly, this strategy was not working. So the city hired a third-party provider to help the veterans find a place to live and to act as a fiscal agent for moving costs and security deposits.

Veterans Affairs in Atlanta divided caseworkers into teams, which competed to house the most veterans.

For many people, however, the most important change came in the forging of relationships. In Atlanta and San Diego, among other cities, decision makers in every relevant agency and outside group met every week, alternating face-to-face meetings with on-line meetings or conference calls. “Having everyone at the table on a regular basis was a real culture change for Atlanta,” said Susan Lampley, who leads the city’s work on homelessness in the office of Mayor Kasim Reed. “It builds trust, generates pressure to fulfill your deliverables, and allows transparency into the process.”

“Relationships count from the very first touch with a veteran on the street, all the way through the system,” said Patricia Leslie, who is the chairwoman of a broad community group that focuses on ending homelessness in San Diego. “The more we know each other, the better troops we make.”

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Tina Rosenberg won a Pulitzer Prize for her book “The Haunted Land: Facing Europe’s Ghosts After Communism.” She is a former editorial writer for The Times and now a contributing writer for the paper’s Sunday magazine. Her new book is “Join the Club: How Peer Pressure Can Transform the World” and the World War II spy story e-book “D Is for Deception”.