



Ending Chronic Veteran Homelessness in Alaska in Five Years Anchorage Project (to be a pilot project/model for Alaska)

Amid all the customary rhetoric honouring military veterans on this Veterans Day, Alaska Beat would like to contribute a sobering statistic. According to a U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs estimate, cited by the [National Coalition for Homeless Veterans](#), a mere eight percent of all Americans are military veterans, but nearly 20 percent of the estimated U.S. homeless population has served our nation's armed forces. We would add that out of the 20 homeless who have died on the streets in Anchorage this past 18 months, 5 were veterans.

If we are serious about ending veteran homelessness in five years, we cannot just do more of what we have been doing. Existing programs and approaches, as good as they are, have not solved this problem. We need new ideas, new approaches, and new partners willing to push the boundaries allowing the full inclusion of our homeless veterans “as they are” not as we wish they would be. First we must get them off the streets, and then we can start to help them find a new path. Ric Davidge, Senate Testimony on ending veteran homelessness in Alaska.

What: TWO New Projects:

We are requesting a one year predevelopment planning grant to support the Alaska Veterans Foundation, Inc. and its partners in creating two scalable and realistic model project plans in order to develop up to 70 single living units of permanent supportive housing in Anchorage. This predevelopment package is designed to be scalable for other areas of the state such as Fairbanks, the Mat-Su Valley, and large rural communities with sufficient homeless veteran populations to warrant such a facility/program

a) Housing First A **WET** harm reduction facility for chronic homeless veterans in Anchorage with application to other Alaskan communities. This is a 25 single living unit structure with offices and meetings rooms structured on the Housing First model. Although the location has not been finalized, we are working on securing an option for 5 acres in Eklutna adjacent to the 5 acres for VetCity. We have also located other options in this area. This co-location would enable staff cost savings as well as other program and facility efficiencies.



b) VetCity A **DRY** project based on the classic Honor Farm concept where residents work (are in training for work or working) no less than 6 days a week, and are then provided housing (up to 50 single, couple, small family cabins). No alcohol allowed. We provide direct integration into all of the trades through a relationship with Helmets to Hard Hats and other VA and state/federal DOL programs and labor organizations and the University of Alaska. The object is to provide an alcohol free, warm, safe environment that they contribute to (1/3 of their income) for as long as it may take to get them fully reintegrated into the work community anywhere in Alaska. Location is 5 acres in Eklutna.

Why? The Need: Although the annual VA Community Homelessness Assessment and Local Education Networking Groups (CHALENG) report to Congress has stated for some time that there are 600 homeless veterans in the area, after two years of effort we have not been able to independently confirm this “on the street” in Anchorage. We now know the 600 number is based on a VA formula. We have, however, confirmed, through the twice yearly Anchorage Homeless Connect and Stand Down events, about 80 to 100 unsheltered homeless veterans in need at a time. Of this group we believe there are fewer than 50 chronic homeless veterans in serious need of long term supportive housing. Other communities across Alaska report homeless veterans, but no serious studies have provided, by community, a clear understanding of the demand for permanent supportive housing for homeless veterans. This project will work with the University of Alaska and others in an attempt to better profile these needs by community.

The Anchorage Mayor’s Homeless Leadership Team (HLT) has also released (May 2010) its recommendations to the Mayor after 8 months of concentrated study by the most knowledgeable leaders on this issue in Anchorage. **Both of these projects are directly consistent with the recommendations of the HLT** to the Mayor. The predevelopment funds/work will provide essential planning for appropriate Housing First and VetCity site selections (Eklutna), physical and program project designs, and a sustainable financial plan for at least the first five years for every 25 unit system of Housing First and VetCity concept. This is a part of HLT recommendation of 200 single living units for the chronic homeless in Anchorage.

Why segregate Veterans?

Most veterans come with a shopping cart of services and benefits earned through service and sacrifice that are not available to nonveterans. This includes grants, per diem, and other services, so it makes sense to bring veterans together pooling these programs. Neither of these facilities will be exclusive for veterans, but they must have a minimum of **75%** veterans to qualify for most of the VA, HUD, and DOL funding sources applicable. Furthermore, there is a long standing and well understood benefit to sitting veterans down together who have shared common experiences (combat and other) to work through their individual issues toward the goal of being a fully functional and appropriate member of the community.

VA National 5 year Program to end Veteran Homelessness

These two projects are within the scope and purpose of the new US Dept of Veteran Affairs national 5 year plan. The VA Secretary is fully committed to meeting veterans “as they are and as they come to us” which is a significant change in the approach of the VA to this challenge. We are members of the **National Committee to End Veteran Homelessness** through the Vietnam Veterans of America and the **National Coalition for Homeless Veterans** and therefore have ongoing direct access to the highest levels of the VA in Washington D.C. including the White House and the key Members of Congress and their staff who are supportive of this national initiative. We meet with and brief these offices and Members quarterly when in Wash DC for meetings.

Existing VA Programs/facilities: Although the Anchorage VA provides an excellent statewide 50 bed Domiciliary (at C & Benson, Anchorage) for recovering (alcohol/drug) homeless veterans which has good success, their barriers to entry, waiting list, failure rate, and recidivism clearly indicate the need for additional beds and a different approach for some vets. In our direct interviews with chronic homeless veterans we find them often unwilling to enter the Domiciliary for a host of reasons. The development of a Housing First facility and VetCity under a loose working partnership of the VA, Veterans Industries, the Municipality of Anchorage, some

Veteran Service Organizations, Trade Union apprenticeship programs, the Alaska Department of Labor, the University of Alaska, etc addresses those concerns.

Given the obvious relationships between this proposal and the existing VA Domiciliary program, we believe that adding these two new models to our community will actually allow the VA Domiciliary to be even more successful with those veterans that choose the VA Domiciliary model while allowing veterans unwilling to accept the Domiciliary concept to find success in our Housing First or VetCity models. The overarching goal of eliminating veteran homelessness is the same, the process and philosophy just a little different with these two additional approaches. Again, it's about meeting veterans "as they are" and then helping them make the appropriate choices that will enable them to be successful in the community.

The VA Community Homelessness Assessment and Local Education Networking Groups (CHALENG) report annually confirms that the VA needs additional facilities for this hard to serve population. We believe, consistent with the Mayor's Homeless Leadership Teams recommendations, that we need new beds in both a Housing First harm reduction model and a longer term supportive housing model like VetCity. These are both a little different then the domiciliary model, because they are designed to meet veterans "as they come to use" many of whom will not use VA programs for a range of reasons. In addition, Mayor Sullivan has expressed strong support for an approach that would build on the old Honor Farm concept. VetCity is based on that specific approach, but with much more intense job integration.

The **VA Grants and Per Diem** program **does not fund** any planning for projects like this. We have contacted the Technical Assistance partnership in Boston referred to us by the Washington, D.C. office of the VA Grants and Per Diem Assistant Director. This group has provided important assistance in the development of this proposal and we anticipate them having a very active and appropriately critical role in the predevelopment work to be funded by this appropriation. The Foundation is not able to fund this predevelopment planning internally; however we are actively working our way through the matrix of issues such as site selection and facility design options under our existing budget and programs. We believe that in partnerships with other nonprofits and for profits, our attempt to identify other funding sources for the project will assist in the financial sustainability of both of these ventures. But we want to get started now, and this predevelopment grant will facilitate that better then any other option we have discovered.

Site: We are currently in negotiations with the private owner (Harry Johnson) for two sites of five acres each in Eklutna. The VetCity site has previously been improved as a potential trailer court and thus has a good gravel pad, well house/water, sewer, and electricity in and functional. This 5 acre tract is our first priority in starting up the VetCity with small cabins now in design by Builders Choice. We have reached an agreement (Dec 1, 2010) on a lease purchase for this tract and have begun making monthly payments consistent with that agreement. We are confident that with the predevelopment appropriation we can leverage that commitment to secure the full purchase cost (under \$400,000) for this 5 acre tract.

The second site for the Housing First model is directly adjacent to the 5 acres now under agreement. The owner is the same, and a veteran, who wants to work with us in the acquisition of this additional 5 acres once we have a full plan in place – that will be developed using this grant.

Why Eklutna? Given the community concerns raised with the municipal discussion around the “Red Roof Inn” Housing First project – although eventually approved, we decided to locate away from Anchorage neighborhoods. Although we originally wanted to locate adjacent to the new VA Clinic and joint hospital, land was not available for that option. This was not just in consideration of the NIMBY problem but also in the best interest of the veterans in our program as it keeps them from reconnecting with negative influences. We believe it critical that we provide a significant space/time barrier between our location and the “4th Ave subculture” that so often draws recovering veterans back to the street. The Eklutna location is perfect. Out of sight and out of mind, but only 20 minutes van ride to the VA Clinic/Hospital in east Anchorage just off the Glenn Highway and Muldoon Road.

Consistent with our statewide approach, we have a representative from Fairbanks participating in our planning team as the Housing First concept/design is to be scalable for possible development in other communities across Alaska. This will allow other locations across Alaska to trailer on our work and not have to start from zero. We believe this imperative if we are to meet the five year target for ending veteran homelessness in Alaska.

Occupants: Although communities talk about ending homelessness in a generic form, there is a significant difference between the “homeless” and the “chronic homeless.” We know that the chronic homeless use a disproportionate amount of our community services and are generally regarded as “the homeless” in general conversation. But we also know that the majority of homeless persons/families are being adequately served with the existing transitional systems, programs, and facilities in Anchorage and in some other communities. Honestly addressing the “chronic” homeless veteran problem, most all with substance abuse combined with serious mental challenges and in some cases physical disabilities, is much more difficult. We believe it requires new approaches. The Housing First harm reduction model has now been proven in a number of communities across America. We think it’s time we offered this proven program here in Anchorage and then across Alaska targeted toward veterans. Furthermore, the honor farm concept was a proven program for decades across America. We believe it can still work and our discussions with homeless veterans, the Anchorage Police Department, the Anchorage Fire Department and with lots of other providers gives us great hope that by combining these two programs in Eklutna we can realize the goal of ending homelessness for our Alaska veterans in 5 years. We also believe VetCity embraces the new “Healing Camp” programs developed by the Alaska Mental Health Trust and in operation in some rural communities. The Healing Camp program allows VetCity to directly meet cultural issues within our homeless veteran community.

Concept: Using the **Housing First - harm reduction model**, this project will likely be some form of loose **partnership** which we hope to have codified by an MOU between the VA/Anchorage and the Alaska Veterans Foundation, Inc. and its partner VetCity, Inc as well as some National Veteran Service Organizations – if they choose to participate - and other partners. Other than the Foundation, the Vietnam Veterans of America have committed to support this venture. We will continue to invite other NVSO’s into this effort, but frankly their participation is not likely unless we show substantive commitments and progress. Approval of this grant will help us leverage wider participation. The Alaska Veterans Foundation & VetCity will play the role of developer and owner/manager of this Housing First Project and VetCity. The project will provide permanent supportive housing designed specifically for chronically homeless veterans. We believe that other national veteran service organizations should provide and collectively support a nationally accredited Veteran Service Officer on site no less than part-time and hold regular/monthly meetings in the common areas to help reintegrate these veteran tenants back

into, at least, the veteran community. The Vietnam Veterans of America, Anchorage Chapter 904 and its state and supportive national offices have made this commitment. We also think it important, consistent with their means and ability, that each veteran service organization in the community makes some annual financial commitment to the ongoing support of this project. We do not wish to in any way imply this commitment to be anything other than voluntary. This strategy will then, for the first time, actually reintegrate our chronic homeless veterans with their brother and sister veterans in our community. **This is an important part of this strategy.** That through our collective effort, as national veteran service organizations; we stand as a family of veterans in support of our brothers/sisters. The reason VVA has already made this commitment is their motto: *“Never Again will One Generation of Veterans Abandon Another.”* Both the Housing First and VetCity concepts continue that commitment.

Based on existing successful models in other states/communities, the Alaska Veterans Foundation, Inc. and VetCity Inc. proposes to develop and operate one veteran-specific purpose built Housing First project comprised of 25 single living units (15 doubles, 10 singles). Included in this structure would be a common area space for the resident manager, small group room, and NVSO office. The Alaska Veterans Foundation, Inc. and VetCity, Inc. plan to develop this project as an operating example that can be replicated in other communities in whole or in part across Alaska, therefore the design and financing of these facilities needs to be scalable for application in other communities, such as Fairbanks. The Anchorage facility/program should function as a working model to assist other communities in understanding and developing their own facilities/programs given sufficient needs and partnerships.

Furnishings will be provided under a contract with VA/Veteran Industries (VI) located at the Anchorage VA Domiciliary based on the *All-A-Board Solid Pine Furniture* designs or something comparable. Veteran's Industries in Anchorage is more than capable of building this furniture in their existing wood shop at the Domiciliary and this work would provide appropriate training and critical income to veterans in recovery within the VI program.

Once completed, these two projects should provide 75 permanent supportive housing units (25 in housing first, and 50 in VetCity) in either a supportive, harm reduction, housing first strategy based on proven need and the successful Housing First models in Seattle, New York, Denver, and Boston or the classic Honor Farms of old. We believe both provide a place and service not now available to veterans in our community or in Alaska.

Services: The medical, mental health, and other “services” needed by the veteran tenants of these projects will be immediately available at the VA clinic/hospital in Anchorage through van transport. Facility and Case managers will be located on site or in coordination with the VA programs in Anchorage.

Transportation: There will be a need for ongoing transportation in and around Anchorage. The driver for this van or small bus should be provided under contract with Veterans Industries located at the Domiciliary in Anchorage. Grants are available to cover the purchase and operation of this vehicle. Optionally, residents who can qualify in VetCity can provide this service through work contacts.

Funding Options:

A. One Year Money (Predevelopment Planning Funds)

• Predevelopment Budget

○ Site plan/design/appraisal	\$ 75,000
○ Architectural and Engineering	\$100,000
○ Legal, Accounting	\$ 30,000
○ Environmental Assessment	\$ 15,000
○ Financial feasibility/underwriting	\$ 20,000
○ <u>Project Management</u>	<u>\$ 60,000</u>
TOTAL	\$300,000

Property Acquisition

Available two 5 acre parcels in Eklutna currently owned by Harry Johnson. One improved and one partially improved. We have an independent appraisal in process on the partially improved tract and a lease purchase agreement in hand. The estimated purchase price for the first 5 acre partially improved tract is \$380,000. We are now working on a purchase and site clean up strategy for the adjoining 5 acre improved site.

The final project design, budget, etc will be completed within one year for submission to the project's various partners and the US House and Senate Veteran's Affairs Committees and the VA (at all levels), the State of Alaska, and prospective partners for physical plant and operational funding. Once funded, the project will be contracted out for construction to SDVOB or Veteran Owned Businesses who must then work with VA Veteran's Industries in all hiring who often have experienced crafts persons in recovery.

B. Development Budget - No Year Money (planning, build, operate)

We wish we could give you an amount so we could get the project funded up front, do the planning and project development, then build both and open them, but there are just too many variables and the design, cost of materials, labor, site cleanup and development will take some time to develop a detailed development and operating Proforma budget. In addition, the Alaska Veterans Foundation, Inc. will need to asses and develop a financing sustainable model/plan incorporating a range of public and private resources to develop and operate these innovative permanent supportive housing projects. Further is the time needed for coordination with the local VA management and programs, and the leadership of the various Veteran Service Organizations through formal MOU's as well as all trade unions, the University of Alaska, the King Career Center, and other job training companies.

Our experience, however, is that unless there is a project and money committed to at least its planning with specific pre-development activities, it's very difficult to get this moving forward just as a concept. We believe these planning funds help give credibility to these two projects sufficient to leverage VA, NVSO, and other provider (private and public) commitments in cooperation.

These projects must be coordinated with the Municipality of Anchorage Coalition on Homelessness who support this request and the MOA Military and Veterans Affairs Commission, the Veterans Administration Homeless Programs, the Municipality of Anchorage including APD and AFD, the Vet Center, the VA Domiciliary, the VA Clinic and joint hospital as well as other local and statewide groups working in the homeless community to ensure appropriate coordination and identification of potential veteran tenants. We therefore believe it

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very appropriate that these funds be appropriated through the Municipality of Anchorage, Homeless project. We have discussed this option with the Director of this program and find them more than willing to oversee these funds to ensure they are appropriately spent consistent with the direction of Congress.

After years of study and struggle to understand the failures of our transitional systems for our homeless veterans, we believe it is now time to offer these two programmatic alternatives - proven in other communities, to help end veteran homelessness in Anchorage and then across Alaska. This is the start, this is the opportunity, and the Foundation on behalf of its Board and that of VetCity is pleased to submit this request in an effort to get these concepts moving forward for all of us and our homeless veterans.

It is an honor,

Ric Davidge, Chairman
Alaska Veterans Foundation, Inc.
VetCity, Inc.

Letters of support collected and available