



## 2015 CITIZEN IMPACT AWARD

Presented by the Partnership for Public Service and the Leadership Alumni Board

**Confidential: Embargoed until August 13, 2015**

**Finalist:** Homeless Veterans Coalition

Aaron Carlson, Thomas Claflin, Christopher Clarke, Meaghan Park and Jeff Scarpiello, Department of Veterans Affairs

**Achievement:** Initiated a pilot project and public-private partnership to ensure that homeless veterans who receive housing vouchers can pay for their start-up utilities and obtain beds, furniture and other household necessities

A housing voucher is a godsend for homeless veterans, but obtaining permanent shelter still leaves many individuals without the ability to pay start-up costs for utilities or buy furniture and other basic household necessities.

A group of *Excellence in Government* Fellows from the Department of Veterans Affairs decided to tackle this issue, developing a pilot project in Cleveland that provides move-in assistance and household goods to veterans who have received housing through the Department of Housing and Urban Development and the VA.

“This project goes beyond just providing veterans with a living arrangement. It gives them the resources to make a house a home,” said Felicita Solá-Carter, a coach with the EIG leadership program.

Lisa Pape, the national director of Homeless Programs for the Veterans Health Administration, said HUD provides housing vouchers and VA can help arrange for social and health services for homeless veterans, but this still leaves a service gap because the government cannot legally pay for furniture or other household items such as dishes, silverware, beds or furniture.

“If you’re a veteran living on the street with a bag of goods and you get a voucher, you have nothing to fill a home. All your possessions are in a bag,” said Pape.

The solution to this problem came during an EIG session that focused on partnering with not-for-profit organizations. The VA team of Aaron Carlson, Thomas Claflin, Christopher Clarke, Meaghan Park and Jeff Scarpiello discussed creating a public-private partnership to meet this pressing need.

After extensive outreach and negotiations, the team obtained clearance from VA’s leadership and legal counsel, and helped create a partnership between the Louis Stokes Cleveland VA Medical Center and the Cleveland Area Veterans Association to provide the necessary assistance to the veterans.

A memorandum was signed on July 15, 2013 defining the processes and stakeholder responsibilities. A common list of veteran move-in assistance needs was developed for use by VA case managers and the team then helped the veterans association successfully register with



the Combined Federal Campaign, the workplace giving program of the federal government that is used as a vehicle to raise money directly for the program.

As a result of this project, a second partnership was launched with the Mt. Olive Missionary Baptist Church, which provides low-cost furniture to veterans through the Cleveland Furniture Bank.

Now, when veterans in Cleveland receive a housing voucher, the case manager can work with the individuals to determine their move-in needs, and the veterans association can immediately provide them with the needed assistance. The framework used in the Cleveland pilot project has been documented and shared throughout the VA for other medical centers to replicate.

While this project is beginning to bear fruit in Cleveland, the team recognized the need for legislative changes that would allow the VA to fund some of these services nationwide without having to rely on outside organizations.

During one of the team's presentations, a classmate described how the Department of State uses "gift authority" to provide assistance in some mission-related endeavors. The team used this idea to draft a legislative proposal providing the VA with the ability to provide direct monetary assistance to homeless veterans, including paying for utilities and furnishings. The proposal was approved by the VA's legislative review board allowing it to move forward for possible debate in Congress this year.

Solá-Carter said the team identified a pressing problem, brought it down to the individual level and overcame numerous obstacles to initiate a program that could be easily replicated and eventually benefit thousands of veterans.

"The team members were all in different locations organizationally and geographically, and they had to come together as a unified team, convene a large meeting of stakeholders in Cleveland, convince people high up in the food chain at the VA, and coordinate with the legislative team and regional leaders," said Solá-Carter.

She said there were "a lot of institutional barriers," but for the team, "it was really about the mission."