

# VETERANS

SERVICES OF THE CAROLINAS

A Division of 

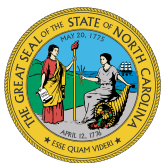


**FIELD GUIDE  
FOR HOMELESS  
VETERANS OUTREACH**

**Veterans Services of the Carolinas (VSC)** has built the Veterans HOPE program for Chronically Homeless Veterans suffering from Severe Mental Illnesses (SMI/SPMI) alongside the NC Division of Mental Health/Developmental Disabilities/Substance Use Services based on over a decade's worth of experience working with Homeless Veterans across North Carolina. Through the Asheville-Buncombe Christian Community Ministries (ABCCM), Veterans Services of the Carolinas brings Federal, State and Non-Profit programming and expertise to homeless Veterans from Murphy to Manteo. Aligning National objectives to North Carolina policies, Veterans HOPE is the newest programming innovation that VSC has put into practice to help our most vulnerable former Servicemembers struggling to return to our communities.

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NC DEPARTMENT OF  
HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES



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# Foreward

Veterans Services of the Carolinas (VSC) is a division of Asheville Buncombe Community Christian Ministry (ABCCM) serving homeless Veterans across North Carolina with programs to include housing, employment, coordination, and outreach. Additionally, ABCCM manages the Veterans Restoration Quarters, a 250 bed male Veterans residential facility, and Transformation Village, a 90 bed women and children residential facility in Asheville, NC.

This publication serves as a quick resource for those conducting effective outreach to the homeless population. The best practices outlined in this guide result from years of service and outreach experience working with homeless Veterans in collaboration with programs such as PATH and VA HUD-VASH here in North Carolina.

The following organizations have been instrumental in contributing knowledge, tools, and resources over the years in the effort to address homelessness across the nation and in North Carolina: United States Interagency Council on Homelessness, North Carolina Coalition to End Homelessness, National Coalition for Homeless Veterans and the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA).

Ending Veteran homelessness cannot be achieved without community collaboration in the public and private sectors. In order to be successful we must continue to improve efficiencies at the systemic and execution levels in the field.

# Best Practices

Based on training, evidence based practices and the consensus of homeless outreach partners over the last decade the following are defined best practices while conducting effective homeless Veterans outreach and engagement:

## *Intentional Outreach*

All outreach must be intentional and efforts must be systematic and comprehensive. Additionally, coordination of outreach efforts must be shared within an organization and with other community partners in order to identify strengths and guarantee the best use of practices and programs. Preparation begins with planning your outreach, whether it being on the street or in the woods..

## *Veteran Centric Approach*

(Person-Centered) This promotes the Veterans right to have choice and control over both the decision and process of exiting homelessness and is an effective strategy to support confidence and empower Veterans to be involved in all decisions throughout the process. This approach must be consistent in all aspects of their journey to include: physical and mental health, substance use, life skills and employment all within their own capacity to live independently. Meeting Veterans where they are at with no judgment or stigma is critically important.

## *Building and Maintaining Trust*

Individuals impacted by homelessness often harbor feelings of systemic mistrust toward solution providers resulting from poor interactions that include trauma, stigma and judgment. Effective outreach must be rooted in trust. Demonstrate trust by always making sure your actions align to your words.

## *Honest Communication*

Listening skills are critical to building a strong foundation for healthy and honest communication. By practicing effective listening, you can accurately receive and interpret messages in your communication process while performing outreach. Practice authenticity in all communication. Avoid making broad statements that appear to offer

finite solutions that you may or may not be able to provide. Course offerings such as Motivational Interviewing and Resources for Resilience™ can help one improve listening and communication skills.

### *Persistence*

Initial resistance on the part of the individual experiencing homelessness is a common barrier to establishing a trusting relationship. You can overcome this resistance through repetitive contact that demonstrates care and empathy. Be persistent! Formulate a contact approach that is forged through frequent and routine communication. One must be self-aware of caseload and capacity to conduct street outreach, so monitor your time and activities and adjust routinely. You may not see relationship results right away but “stay the course” and be persistent.

### *Cultural Sensitivity (Military Competency)*

Understanding Veterans and how previous experiences to include trauma have shaped their current situation and life. This learned skill set is key when conducting various outreach services to people whose unique needs may differ widely. Being mindful of cultural differences may also require a different approach in order to be more culturally relevant and appropriate. Failure to adjust may result in re-traumatization and propagate biases or stereotypes.

### *Using Peer Support Specialists*

Peer Support Specialists are people living in recovery with mental illness and/or substance use disorder and who provide support to others whom can benefit from their lived experiences. Lived experiences can also include homelessness or other traumas. We have found that the utilization of Peer Support Specialists, specifically among our Veterans population, have yielded better health outcomes due to the bond and relationship built during both outreach and services. It is highly recommended that Peer Support Specialists complete the required 40 hour training and be North Carolina Certified. Additionally, the Veterans Support Specialist program offers extensive training on supporting Veterans and is offered by the North Carolina Governors Institute.

## *Critical Time Intervention*

Critical Time Intervention (CTI) is a time-limited evidence-based practice that mobilizes support for society's most vulnerable individuals during periods of transition. It facilitates community integration and continuity of care by ensuring that a person has enduring ties to their community and support systems during these critical periods. (Silberman School of Social Work, Center for Advancement of Critical Time Intervention)

## *Harm Reduction*

This is a critically important principle of effective homeless outreach. It is a means through which outreach specialist can establish trusting relationships with homeless individuals promote safety and continuously monitor safety issues while intervening as needed. A harm reduction approach aims to provide a quality service by reducing the adverse effects of homelessness. The primary goal of outreach when with people who are "sleeping rough" is to assist people to improve their health and housing outcomes. (Homelessness NSW, 2016)

## *Motivational Interviewing*

Motivational Interviewing (MI) is a collaborative conversation style, and is one of the most effective tools for helping to strengthen a person's own motivation and commitment to change. In this model techniques such as OARS – Open ended Questions, Affirmations, Reflective Listening, and Summarizing help to shift us out of the role of feeling responsible for others change, and empowers clients to embody responsibility to initiate change.

## *Resources for Resilience™*

Resources for Resilience™ (RFR) offers easy-to-use strategies designed to help people of all ages and backgrounds in the aftermath of singular stressful events, and in response to the distress that individuals experience when confronted with significant, ongoing adversity. Understanding trauma-informed care and chronic stress promotes resilience both for ourselves and the people we serve, creating a foundation to prevent future adversity and help people stay healthy and connected during tough times.

# Groundwork/Prep

## *Collaboration*

Street outreach is conducted on behalf of the community rather than one agency, requiring collaboration among multiple stakeholders. Knowledge of and engagement with all partners implementing street outreach efforts leads to more strategic use of resources and more comprehensive coverage and identification of all people experiencing unsheltered homelessness (United States Interagency Council on Homelessness, June 2019 pg. 1)

Street outreach efforts are also coordinated with the broader network of programs, services, or staff who are likely to encounter individuals experiencing unsheltered homelessness, but whose regular focus is broader than homelessness. This might include law enforcement and other first responders, hospitals, health and behavioral healthcare providers, child welfare agencies, homeless education liaisons, workforce systems, faith-based organizations, and other community-based providers. (United States Interagency Council on Homelessness, June 2019 pg. 2)

Conversations with agencies such as Amazon, UPS, and USPS can lead to tips and indicators on where to look and how to engage. Think outside of the box and do not discount these providers and their observations of their surroundings.

## *Clothing*

When conducting outreach be sure to dress appropriately but expect the unexpected. Wear clothing that will protect you from the elements such as briars and poison ivy. In areas where there can be snakes, chaps are recommended. Be sure to wear reflective apparel when conducting outreach in times of low lighting. Footwear is extremely important and having appropriate boots will decrease the chances of nails and even needles penetrating, some outreach staff even use steel plates as inserts to mitigate this type of incident from occurring. Always look at the forecast before stepping out and be prepared for rain when applicable. Keep in mind the temperature and layer accordingly as you can always



remove clothing. Lastly, do not wear anything that could be offensive or make someone uncomfortable.

### *First-Aid Kits*

When you conduct outreach, a first-aid kit should be carried every time you step off. This will ensure care for yourself and Veterans should you encounter the need. The kit should contain items to address insect bites, puncture wounds, cuts, sprains, dog/snake bites, etc. If you have any type of allergies or conditions, this is something to also consider. Another item recommended is Narcan, in the event that this life saving measure must be taken.

### *Mapping*

Having a good idea of the landscape and area that you will be covering will prevent confusion and keep your plan clear and concise. When conducting outreach in wooded areas it is a good idea to use a compass or even a GPS to mark your routes. This also provides a way to mark areas in order to track tendencies, trends and travel routines.

- *Use GPS coordinates when applicable*
- *Color Code your findings*
- *Analyze routes and seasonal tendencies specific areas*
- *Identify major landmarks before stepping off*



# Approach

First impressions can be vital, specifically when building trust and relationships. How you first introduce yourself may set precedence moving forward. Always introduce yourself and organization when approaching even if you are returning to a homeless encampment. Some tips on communicating effectively include:

## *Observation From A Distance*

Be observant from a distance as you approach. Take things into consideration such as appearance, general health, behavior, basic needs, social cues and setting. Observing these things will help develop basic assessment information and support how to make an introduction.

## *Posture/Body Language*

When approaching individuals during outreach, they will often see you before you see them. Even if they don't, from the moment you announce yourself they will be meticulously watching every single move you make, where you look, how you stand, how quickly you move, and most importantly, what you do with your hands. It is important to present yourself as a safe and open person, and prevent any movement or action that can be seen as aggressive, condescending, and disrespectful. Your conversation won't always be with words. Keep in mind Veterans are trained with reading body language and posture. If you come across negative or closed off, it will be apparent.

## *Tone of Voice*

Use of words and tone of voice can have a triggering effect on someone who has experienced any trauma or is suffering from a mental health issue. It is important to be culturally aware to not offend. Be aware of your own implicit biases and training on military culture and cultural awareness can reduce misunderstandings which will mitigate tension during contact.

## *Identification*

Always wear your badge and any other items that will identify who you are and your organization. This not only lets the individuals you are

approaching know who you are, but also law enforcement and other workers in the field, such as property owners.

### *Get Permission*

Even while having good intentions, it is still important to request permission before entering someone's property or land. Property owners might have had experiences where inhabitants left trash to damaged property. Additionally, when approaching a tent or encampment it is important to avoid being overly imposing. Individual's experiencing homelessness have limited control over their lives. Not everyone wants to be found or is seeking assistance. Taking "No" for an answer is acceptable and can help create trust.

### *Engagement*

Find something in common. This can make breaking the ice easier and create a conversation in an organic manner. It is imperative getting to know the individual in a laid back, open-ended manner. Consistency and persistence is key with engagement; showing up and staying engaged to their needs helps build trust. Try to learn about the individual's personal narrative, including where he/she is from, how long he/she has been homeless, and what life circumstances may have led to the current housing situation. Show empathy and understanding, while not pushing an agenda.

### *Move at Their Pace*

Patience. Patience. Patience. Making recommendations or referrals does not need to occur in the first meeting, and although it might seem helpful to address all needs at once, most will desire a more gradual process. All conversations and decisions should be driven by the Veteran. Resistance can occur for a host of reasons to include fear, lack of trust, or mental illness. Continuing to show support and empathy will help address these reasons over time.

### *Follow Through*

Lastly, if you commit to an action or a task, following through and follow up. Breaking trust is more damaging and harder to rebound if you do not follow through. Acts of consistency encourage engagement and build trust.

# Safety

The safety of all parties should be one of the most important factors when conducting outreach. This needs to be addressed with all stages of outreach and trump everything when it is compromised. The following are guiding principles for safety while employing outreach services.

## *Situational Awareness*

Situational awareness when conducting outreach is paramount in terms of safety. It is important to be aware of all your surroundings and interpret the information. Situational awareness is not just your sight, use all your senses to include what you hear and smell. Your “gut” feeling at certain times should not be ignored. If you feel unsafe, remove yourself from the situation.

## *Wildlife*

Wildlife in all locations can be a health and safety concern. You should be prepared for wildlife including, but not limited to, raccoons, snakes, rats, and bears. Individuals you encounter may also have animals or pets that can pose a risk. The presence of an animal on location is almost impossible to detect until it is too late. Dogs can be incredibly protective of their owners and pose a real danger and risk to anyone entering an encampment. Use your situational awareness be aware of both human and animal feces as well.



## Trip Wire/Booby Trap



### *Booby Traps*

Unfortunately, many Veterans experiencing homelessness may present with mental health disorders and have extreme paranoia. Be aware of any strings or lines that look like they are out of place. They can be positioned from feet level to head level and may activate alarms or harmful acts. Keep an eye out for piles of leaves, or other items that seem out of place, as these can be concealing holes or other types of traps that can be harmful.

### *Substance Use*

Another unfortunate reality is that many experiencing homelessness struggle with substance use. This is often evident in encampments or inhabited areas. Be mindful of syringes or other drug related paraphernalia and recognize that it is a potential for criminal activity. Try to familiarize yourself with various substances and the effects they have on individuals.

### *Have a Battle Buddy*

It is highly recommended to always work in pairs. Having two sets of eyes and someone beside you will enhance all your senses and create a stronger front with individuals that may be aggressive. Even when you cannot work in pairs, informing a teammate of your routes and times of outreach will keep you safe in the event you get lost or hurt. This practice has been incorporated into operating procedures in many organizations.

# Where to Begin

Some great places to begin your extensive outreach are listed below. Keep in mind that while outreach occurs all the time, intentional outreach is specific and planned. Starting your outreach efforts in these areas will help you gain some information and clues to support this population moving forward. Be sure to check these locations during both operating hours and after-hours as a regular practice.

## *Soup Kitchens/Food Pantries*

Individuals experiencing homelessness can often be found at or near these locations as they often provide hot meals or non-perishable food items.

## *Donation or Crisis Centers*

Locations known for free supplies and clothing can be a daily and weekly stop for any and all at-risk individuals. Examples of these types of centers include Salvation Army and Christian ministries.

## *Storage Units*

Sometimes people will use storage units as shelter as it provides privacy at a relative low cost or free if they break into a unit. This type of behavior exists more in older and dilapidated units, but can occur in newer units as well.





## *Commercial Properties or Parks*

Commercial properties and retail establishments are some of the most frequented locations for at-risk and homeless individuals. In highly populated areas the opportunity for pan-handling can be beneficial and is often where homeless groups may reside. Both long-term and short-term encampments may be found in nearby tree lines, under bridges, or in abandoned buildings.



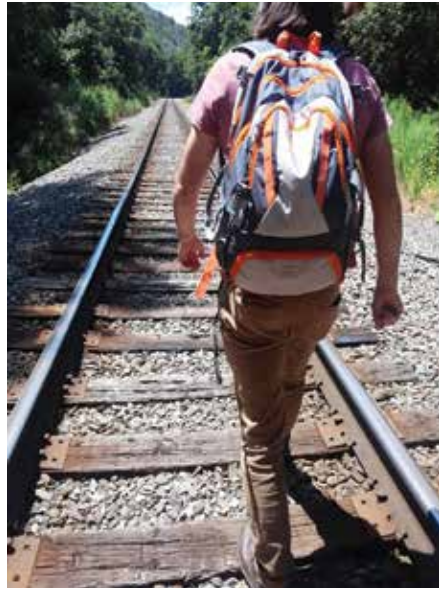
## *Abandoned Buildings*

This includes homes, trailers, and retail businesses. Be particularly mindful when approaching these environments as these have a tendency to have drug and other criminal activity. Vacant trailers are common for the homeless to utilize due to their easy accessibility and they provide good shelter from the elements. Additionally, the owners of these buildings may be more hesitant to call law enforcement.



## *Train Tracks*

Train tracks can be used as a thoroughfare for many homeless for a multitude of reasons. Railways provide an ease of access to many commercial areas that can provide food, shelter, and other resources. Many railroad tracks run through wooded areas, offering seclusion while still maintaining accessibility, and when inclined, can provide transportation. Abandoned railroad cars also provide a great opportunity for shelter.



## *Rivers*

Campsites found along rivers or other bodies of water are common. These are sometimes hard to identify with traditional means. Having open communication with individuals, such as kayakers or fisherman, can result in identifying some of these encampments.



## *Laundromats*

Most laundromats are open 24 hours and provide a place to wash as well as shelter during inclement weather. Additionally, they are known to have free Wi-Fi.



### *Parking Lots*

Often you will find people “car camping” and living in their vehicles. This usually happens in larger parking lots and away from the main flow of the business. This type of behavior occurs due to the proximity to bathrooms, warmth and other resources.



### *Under Bridges or Overpasses*

Homeless encampments are most often in locations not easily accessed or detected. Many bridge or overpass locations have high or low sections not easily seen. Homeless individuals will use these locations to set up a camp at the lowest areas directly below the bridge.



# Signs & Indicators

Specific signs will help you identify where individuals may be traveling or residing and will increase your ability to engage and provide support. Proper preparation will set you up for success. However, situational awareness and knowing what to look for will keep you safe and increase your ability to conduct successful outreach. Below is a list of possible signs and indicators that may aid you in identifying homeless individuals. Paying close attention and being detail oriented when observing all signs and indicators will pay off with extensive and consistent outreach to areas.

## *Trampled Ground*

People in general are creatures of habit and like all of us will follow the same routines in the same locations at the same times. Even if a location is empty, one of the identifiers of frequent utilization is a hard packed or trampled ground. Look for paths that have no vegetation or trees and bushes being intentionally cut back for easier access. Everything from a walking path or an animal path to a sleeping area can be easily identified.

## *Arranged Sticks or Rocks*

Often you will find rocks or sticks that have been meticulously arranged in a manner that if disturbed, an individual will know that someone has visited their site. These arrangements can also be used to communicate to other homeless individuals in the area. It is important not to disturb these areas as it may also be a trap. Look for unusual or disturbed dirt, as this is also a sign that someone is burying food, water, or belongings, most likely in anticipation of returning to the site.

### Buried Food/Supplies



## *Footprints*

Footprints and tracks can be used to locate encampments not easily seen. They can also tell a larger story of how many different people, possible children, or even the size of individuals that may be nearby. Paying close attention to the size, depth, and tread of shoe or boot is important when making these types of assumptions.

## *Shopping Carts & Bicycles*

Shopping carts are often used to transport property. Abandoned carts may lead to trails or encampments. Bicycles located in odd areas could be an indication that someone is close by or be used as a distraction from where they are camping.

## *Trash*

Trash about the encampment may offer helpful intel. Dates on receipts, perishable food containers, and weathered trash are indicators to how recently that area has been inhabited. Large dug holes with a lot of trash may indicate that several encampments are nearby, as they may be using the area as a makeshift community landfill. Trash bags may be used to mark trails by way of tying them to a tree or bush that provides direction of trailheads. The arrangement of empty bottles or cans may also provide the same type of communication.



# Service Definitions

## *Homeless/Homeless Individual*

- An individual or family without a full-time or adequate nighttime residence.
- An individual or family with a full-time nighttime residence that is not intended to be a regular place for people to sleep, including a car, park, abandoned building, bus or train station, airport, or camping ground.
- An individual or family living in a shelter (including a hotel or motel) designated as a temporary living arrangement.
- An individual residing in a place not meant for human habitation or exiting an institution where they temporarily resided.
- An individual or family who will imminently lose their housing, including housing they own, rent, or live in without paying rent or are sharing with others, as well as rooms in hotels or motels.
- An individual or family who is fleeing or attempting to flee domestic violence, dating violence, sexual assault, stalking, or other dangerous or life-threatening conditions in their current housing situation.
- An unaccompanied youth and homeless families with children and youths. (The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act)

## *Mental Illness (MI)*

Disorder that affects a person's thinking, mood, and/or behavior — and they can range from mild to severe. (SAMHSA)

## *Serious Mental Illness (SMI)*

A mental illness that interferes with a person's life and ability to function. (SAMHSA)

## *Serious and Persistent Mental Illness (SPMI)*

A group of severe mental health disorders as defined in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual used by mental health professionals to diagnose clients. The SPMI category includes Major Depression, Bipolar Disorders, Schizophrenia, and Borderline Personality Disorder.

### *Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)*

A psychiatric disorder that may occur in people who have experienced or witnessed a traumatic event such as a natural disaster, a serious accident, a terrorist act, war/combat, rape, or who have been threatened with death, sexual violence, or serious injury. (American Psychiatric Association)

### *Anxiety Disorders*

Emotions characterized by feelings of tension, worried, thoughts, and physical changes, like increased blood pressure. People with anxiety disorders usually have recurring intrusive thoughts or concerns. They may avoid certain situations out of worry. They may also have physical symptoms such as sweating, trembling, dizziness, or a rapid heartbeat. (American Psychological Association)

### *Substance Use Disorder (SUD)*

A complex condition in which there is uncontrolled use of a substance despite harmful consequence. People with SUD have an intense focus on using certain substance(s) such as alcohol, tobacco, or illicit drugs, to the point where the person's ability to function in day to day life becomes impaired. The most severe SUDs are sometimes called addictions. (American Psychiatric Association)



### *Self Medication*

A behavior in which individuals use any substance to self administer treatment for physical or mental ailments. Self medication is used to lessen the effects of stress and anxiety without the guidance of a healthcare provider. Often times this leads to other issues such as addictions or other drug or alcohol related problems.

# Resources

*Veterans Services of the Carolinas NCServes*  
855-962-8387

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## *LME/MCO Contacts*

VAYA Health  
Crisis: 800-849-6127

Sandhills Center Office  
Crisis: 800-256-2452

Trillium Health  
Crisis: 877-685-2415

Alliance Health Office  
Crisis: 800-510-9132

Cardinal Innovations  
Crisis: 800-939-5911

Eastpointe Office  
Crisis: 800-913-6109

Partners Behavioral Health  
Crisis: 888-235-4673

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## *North Carolina VA Medical Centers*

Asheville  
828-298-7911

Durham  
919-286-0411

Salisbury  
704-638-9000

Fayetteville  
910-488-2120

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## *North Carolina VET Centers*

Charlotte  
704-549-8025

Greenville  
252-355-7920

Spindale  
828-288-2757

Fayetteville  
910-488-6252

Jacksonville  
910-577-1100

Greensboro  
336-323-2660

Raleigh  
919-361-6419

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*NC Department of Military  
and Veterans Affairs*  
844-624-8387

*Stephen A. Cohen  
Military Family Clinic*  
910-615-3737

# Notes

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