

Homeless Shelter Workers in Midwestern Urban Centers

Archie Green Fellows Project AFC2016034

**Oral History of Emma Akers, Outreach Triage Social Worker
with the Veterans Administration Community Resource and Referral Center
Minneapolis, Minnesota on February 9, 2017**

Summary of Interview

Emma Akers works as an Outreach Triage Social Worker at the Community Resource and Referral Center (CRRC), a drop-in center for homeless veterans at the Veterans Administration Community Resource and Referral Center (CRRC) in downtown Minneapolis. The CRRC is located at 1201 Harmon Place, Minneapolis, Minnesota, 55403.

This interview took place in Emma Akers' office at this CRRC location.

Interview Log

- 00:00:01 Introduction
- 00:00:17 Job title and responsibilities; Emma is one of two Outreach Triage Social Workers at the Community Resource and Referral Center (CRRC), a drop-in center for homeless veterans; works closely with case managers for the HUD-VASH (Housing and Urban Development-Veterans Affairs Supportive Housing) officed there; also carries a caseload of vets who aren't eligible for HUD-VASH; generally available for walk-ins, the "front door" to services for homeless vets;
- 00:01:35 HUD-VASH description; this center covers the metro, Duluth, Mankato, Rochester, and Western Wisconsin; they have about 640 Section 8 vouchers and vets must be homeless using the HUD definition, that is, on the streets or in shelter (staying on someone's couch does not count, for example); comes with intensive case management; brief aside about working within strict confines of the V.A. compared with other social service positions;
- 00:04:10 Clarification of what makes one eligible or not eligible for HUD-VASH; an eligibility office makes these decisions;
- 00:05:08 Requirements of her position; not required to see a certain number of people or other numerical expectations; Emma performs intake assessments; her office holds the HUD-VASH interest list for eligible individuals; vets placed on the list based on a number of factors; among characteristic prioritized are:
- female vets
 - vets who served in Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF), Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) or Operation New Dawn (OND)
 - veteran families with kids
 - veterans over 62 years of age;

When a person reaches the top of the list, a voucher must be available; then they work with the Public Housing Authority (Minneapolis, St. Paul and Metro) and they have between 90 days and 6 months to find housing using the voucher or it will expire;

- 00:07:29 Barriers faced by homeless veterans are similar to general homeless population; possibly Vietnam era vets face more specific barriers; story about a Vietnam era vet; discussion of distrust of the V.A. and government; reference to recent news about V.A. struggles; her location is a five-star entity;
- 00:10:42 Discussion of harm reduction; aside about security staff at her location; philosophy is that people can visit her location if they have been using drugs or alcohol as long as their behavior isn't a problem; story about an individual visiting while intoxicated;
- 00:13:52 Description of a typical work day: people see Emma with a wide variety of needs; sometimes just need bus tokens; story of one vet who has been sleeping in his car; Emma employs strategies including using humor, talking about sports, to make visitors comfortable; story about a young vet who was embarrassed to be homeless; story of a vet whose income may be too high to qualify for HUD-VASH; story of a man who needed documents copied; story about a vet who just wanted to talk about hating shelters; story about a vet who needed temporary housing and used Airbnb;
- 00:16:42 Description of the CRRC; the entire building is for mental health and homeless programs; previously located at the V.A.; HUD-VASH started in 2008, but triage workers like herself weren't added until 2013; discussion of how much she likes the work of short-term, acute needs;
- 00:18:24 Following eligibility for HUD-VASH, Emma then connects people with a case manager; discussion of case work; ultimate goal of HUD-VASH is that people would graduate to a Section 8 voucher because they don't need the case management, but there's a shortage of Section 8 vouchers;
- 00:20:01 How veterans find out about CRRC; word on the street, outreach to shelters, Emma's relationships with staff at social services; story about her friend referring a veteran from a grocery store;
- 00:22:01 Clarification that homeless outreach used to be located at the V.A. building near Minnehaha Park/Falls; discussion of the V.A. and homeless vets historically; national effort to end veteran homelessness in more recent years; homeless veterans registry, created by Eric Grumdahl for the state of Minnesota, is used to locate veterans who sign a release of information; the registry group then assists one another in finding housing for these veterans;
- 00:24:54 Discussion of combat or non-combat veterans; how far back veterans' service goes; story about an 84-year-old woman who was a WAC (Women's Army Corps); story about an 89-year-old WWII vet who lost his apartment; sees few recently discharged vets; refers some individuals to MACV (Minnesota Assistance Council for Veterans);
- 00:28:14 Discussion about not being a veteran, while working with veterans; story about her intern, a veteran from the marines; story about a veteran who was unhappy working with her; story about marines and unique lingo; story about personal dynamics, social work, and disclosure;

- 00:36:01 Discussion of Emma's philosophy or approach; likes to build rapport; meet people where they are; the fact that everyone is down at one time or another; her mother's recent death gave her perspective that helps her do her work better; not passing judgement; story about a vet who was particular about what apartment she would take;
- 00:39:13 Discussion of individuals who were HUD-VASH eligible, but difficult to house; lifetime sex offenders or those who have an arson charge; story about trying to find housing for a level 3 sex offender; discussion about rehabilitation; story about current politics, hiring freeze, getting all vouchers used; story about a veteran she asked to work harder;
- 00:43:27 Advice for someone starting in her position; be open; story about a vet with a dog; don't take things personally; prepare for a variety of work; story about needing to board a cat for a vet; cleaning bathroom floors; Emma likes the variety and opportunity to make someone's day better;
- 00:45:29 End