Abilene, TX, ends veteran homelessness in record time

BY KRISTIN KELLOGG, FEBRUARY 28, 2019 - 4:04PM

Abilene has become the ninth community in the country to end veteran homelessness as part of Built for Zero, a national movement of more than 70 communities working to end veteran and chronic homelessness

For John Meier, ending veteran homelessness is personal.

After serving in the U.S. Marines Corps, Meier experienced a layoff and then an eviction. With no other housing options, he slept in his car for three months.

Meier was able to escape homelessness, through the support of the VA and a dedicated case manager. He's grateful for the assistance and support he received, which helped him regain housing and then employment. Now Meier works to help house veterans experiencing homelessness in Abilene, Texas.

"I came into this field by personal experience. So I look at every homeless veteran, and think: that's me," he says.

On Thursday, Meier and his team at West Texas Homeless Network and Home Again West Texas announced that they've *functionally ended* veteran homelessness in Abilene. They also became the fastest community to achieve this milestone, just 10 months after joining the Built for Zero movement. They're the first community to reach "functional zero" for veterans in Texas, Built for Zero's standard for measuring an end to homelessness.

With this achievement, Abilene has become the ninth community in the country to end veteran homelessness as part of Built for Zero, a national movement of more than 70 communities working to end veteran and chronic homelessness. Since 2015, more than 100,000 people have been housed by participating communities.

From left to right: Alexzandra Hust, Katherine Bisson, John Meier, and Stephania Gilkey

Here's how Abilene ended veteran homelessness:

1). They made sure they'd accounted for everyone

First, Abilene had to find every veteran in their area experiencing homelessness. They met each person, learned what challenges they were facing, and collected this information in a [By-Name List](#). Using Built for Zero's assessment tools, they were able to ensure that they'd accounted for every veteran experiencing homelessness in their region and made sure that they were keeping track of each person who enters or exits homelessness there.
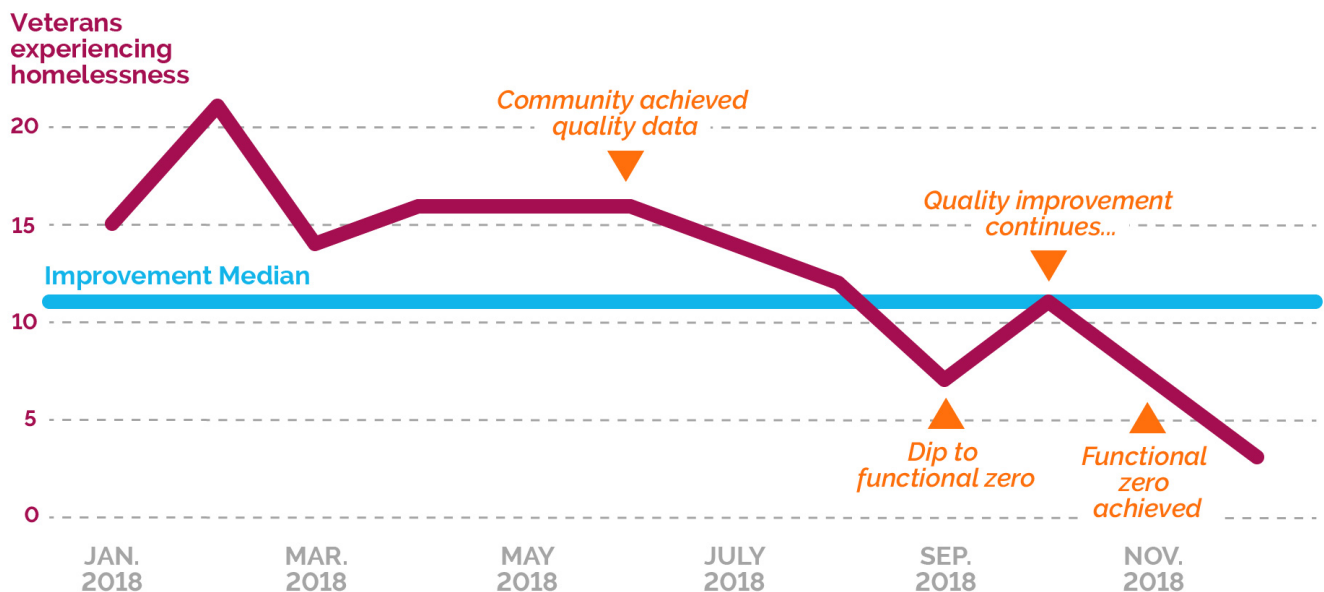
2). They worked together
All the agencies focused on homelessness in Abilene came together to form a command center. Their shared aim: ending veteran homelessness. They began meeting twice a month to start shrinking their By-Name List by making housing plans for every veteran. Each meeting, they reported on how many veterans were experiencing homelessness and what actions they could take to help them into housing. This regular contact and collaboration across agencies created accountability and momentum, as they saw the number of veterans experiencing homelessness dropping as a result of their actions.

3). They tried new things
Armed with reliable data on every veteran experiencing homelessness in Abilene, the team tested strategies to better serve them. Some ideas were aimed at preventing more veterans from losing their homes, while others were designed to house veterans actively experiencing homelessness. For example, they coordinated with local landlords and the Public Housing Authority to prioritize people experiencing homelessness for available units. All the while, the Abilene team was tracking the progress of the veterans in their community experiencing homelessness, so they could measure which interventions were helping.

Abilene's timeline to Zero

Taken together, these strategies worked: Abilene got faster at housing veterans experiencing homelessness, reducing the average length of time it took to place a veteran into housing from more than 40 days to 26 days. They kept the momentum going with creative new ideas to rally their community around their goals, like a 100-Day Mayor's Challenge to help them end veteran homelessness.

What's next

Now Abilene is focused on maintaining this achievement and working on an end to chronic homelessness.

They know their work isn't over. Functional zero isn't a destination— it's not like once a community achieves this milestone, they're done. Instead, communities must continually work to maintain this progress, adapting their solutions as the problem of homelessness changes over time.

"We're not done. I don't know that we'll ever be done," says Meier. "We're going to constantly shift and evolve to meet the needs of our population."