

# How Rockford Changed Course to Tackle Veterans' Homelessness

## *Using Data to Diagnose and Remedy Complex Problems*

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### *Epilogue*

*"We didn't know a lot when we started. We didn't know how to measure progress. We didn't know how to measure interventions. We didn't understand how to test and use the data from a test to improve our system. To me, data is what makes our system work—in terms of a system. It doesn't necessarily make that personal contact or that housing placement work, but it makes the system work. Without the system, the personal contacts and the one-on-one stuff doesn't work."*

- Jennifer Jaeger, Community Services director, City of Rockford, IL

In November 2014, Rockford began testing its new coordinated entry system, which would officially debut on January 3, 2015 along with a twenty-four-hour homelessness crisis hotline. On January 15, bi-weekly case conferencing began in Rockford city offices, with the local and regional partners on veterans' homelessness attending. Some of the attendees included representatives from the US Department of Veterans Affairs (VA); the city housing authority; and numerous private charities or nonprofits offering beds or other housing, health, and case managing services.<sup>i</sup> Forty-two unhoused veterans—as far as the Rockford team knew—needed to be housed. There could be many more; one task would be to find and count them.

Before case conferencing, Rockford housing advocate Angie Walker recalled, "We didn't do a lot of work between the agencies." With any new person coming into the system, she said, "You would call agency A and ask if they had an open unit or something like that but we wouldn't sit down with a bigger group to talk specifically about a client." In contrast, a Built for Zero (BfZ) coach who worked intensively with Rockford described a well-functioning case conferencing session as a fast-moving, agenda-driven meeting where, for each entry on the by-name list, "You identify the barriers and you work as a team to figure out how you're going to solve it to get the person housed." She offered this typical scenario:<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> See Appendix 1 for the members of the Rock River Homeless Coalition (i.e., the regional Continuum of Care).

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**VA:** "Look, they have a voucher, and they're set up with it and it expires in ninety days. I don't know why they're not housed."

**Agency:** "They tried on their own to find an apartment. They can't find anyone who will accept the voucher."

**Local facilitator:** "Can you do some housing navigation with this person? Does the case manager know why the documentation isn't there?"

In Rockford, however, case conferencing did not start that way. The process involved the most important player in anything to do with veterans—the Veterans Administration (VA)—who would send an employee to the sessions, but for confidentiality reasons, barred her from sharing information about individual veterans or even making referrals. This vital participant was unable to contribute, a situation that lasted into March when Mayor Morrissey's office finally reached out to Washington—to the VA, and to Housing and Urban Development (HUD). Still, the situation required some serendipity or luck: the arrival of a new leader at the regional VA office in Madison, Wisconsin, to break up the logjam. Along with hiring an enthusiastic new outreach coordinator—a VA counterpart to Angie Walker—the VA plunged into the work.<sup>ii</sup>

Proper case conferencing relied on a "quality" By-Name List (BNL), the principal tool that would convert data to meet the designated goal of housing individual veterans.<sup>iii</sup> Working on its BNL, Rockford made early mistakes. Walker and her boss Jennifer Jaeger found that it was easy to over-stuff the BNL with non-measurable data: case notes, basically. "We branched out too far," Jaeger said, "We got beyond measurable data with stuff that actually impacted the goal we were trying to get to, and not everything we wanted to know." One result was that it slowed down the case conferencing meetings with the partners making the placements or offering services. What was needed were the basics of name, status, location, eligibility, and health conditions on a shared spreadsheet that allowed the group to work off the list quickly to name a client, identify needs, and assign him to a provider who would take responsibility for not only assisting the person but keeping the group up to date.

Throughout the year, Morrissey kept a public eye on the process. In his annual State of the City address, he paid prominent attention to the goal of solving veterans' homelessness in Rockford. And through his monthly (and public) Rockstat meetings with his mayoral administration, he made sure that homelessness was an agenda item each month with Jaeger and Walker updating the group on their results, demonstrating what BfZ director Beth Sandor called the "political will . . . to hold himself accountable, and the city agencies accountable for their progress."

The turning-point came when Morrissey felt that the partners took over from the city. "We were hosting the meetings, we were producing the data, all very important stuff, but the group itself came to own the enterprise." How did he know when he got there? "Truly shared ownership is when you have people jumping out of their seats to say, "Hey, I've got him. I'm the lead case manager for Joe Smith. He's still homeless but we're going to get to him. Could you help us out?"

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<sup>ii</sup> Relationships with the VA had been a stumbling block even before the project to end veterans' homelessness began. In 2014, when Angie Walker signed Rockford up to Built for Zero, all local and regional stakeholders in the CoC had to sign on, too. "Your housing authority, your continuum of care, your VA—they all had to say yes, we are in," said BfZ director Beth Sandor. But in Rockford, at the VA, the paperwork got stuck. "To this day, they've never signed it," Walker said in 2020.

<sup>iii</sup> See Appendix 2 for a sample of disidentified Rockford By-Name List (from 2020).

## Reaching the Goal: Functional Zero for Veterans

On December 18, 2015, Community Solutions, Built for Zero's parent organization, issued a [press release](#) announcing Rockford as the program's first community to reach functional zero for veteran homelessness:

In the entire Rockford region, zero veterans remain on the streets and just eight remain in transitional housing. This is equal to the number of veterans Rockford has proven it can routinely house in a given month. All eight of Rockford's remaining homeless veterans are in the process of being connected to permanent housing. They are indoors, known to the city by name and represent just .08 percent of all veterans living in the city.<sup>2</sup>

BfZ's press release ended with the acknowledgement that reaching functional zero was not the same as saying that homelessness among veterans had ended. Veterans would surely, for any number of reasons, fall homeless again. The difference was that Rockford's region could "now measurably ensure that homelessness will be a temporary difficulty in a veteran's life. It won't become their life, and it won't define who they are."<sup>3</sup> When Rockford began in January 2015, the target was forty-two veterans. At a presentation two years later, in 2017, Angie Walker announced that Rockford had housed 104 veterans.<sup>iv</sup> As was expected, forty-two was never the correct number, and meanwhile there were inflows of new veterans to account for.

Having reached the goal, Rockford announced its next one: chronic homelessness. Chronically unhoused people had, for many reasons, often lost housing more than once, and the longer they were on their own tended to make them harder to reach. They were also, for landlords, not as attractive a proposition as taking care of veterans, which could seem like one's patriotic duty. For this group, which, unlike veterans, was characterized "primarily [by] time, not affiliation," explained BfZ, functional zero was defined differently: "when the number of people experiencing chronic homelessness is zero, or if not zero, then either 3 or 0.1 percent of the total number of individuals reported in the most recent-point-in-time count, whichever is greater."<sup>v</sup>

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<sup>iv</sup> "Ending Homelessness: Using Creative Outreach Strategies to Reach the Hardest to House," Angie Walker slide deck for Community Action Partnership Conference (CAPCON) 2017. In the same presentation, Walker revealed that 140 chronically homeless people had been housed.

<sup>v</sup> <https://community.solutions/key-definitions/#:~:text=Functional%20Zero%20%E2%80%93%20Chronic,time%20count%2C%20whichever%20is%20greater>.

## Appendices

### Appendix 1 Members of the Rock River Homeless Coalition (aka the Winnebago and Boone Counties Continuum of Care)

Name	Role/Service	Focus or type
Carpenter's Place	Case Management Transitional Housing Permanent Supportive Housing Day-center & Food Employment & Training Religious services	Christian mission
Casa of Winnebago County	Legal advocates for children	nonprofit
Rockford Human Services (Community Action Agency)	Coordination Outreach	city agency
Crusader Community Health	Health services	nonprofit
U.S. Dept. of Veteran's Affairs	Housing funding Health care funding Education support services Disability funding Record keeping	federal
Hope Haven DeKalb	Emergency Housing Rapid Rehousing Permanent Supportive Housing Homeless prevention Life Skills Training	nonprofit
Institute for Community Alliance	Data & Technical Support (to agencies)	nonprofit
Meet my Shoes	Social resources for veterans & poor	nonprofit
Oak Street Health	Health care (primary)	nonprofit
One Body Collaborative, Inc	Religious connector (services to churches & religious organizations)	Christian mission
Prairie State Legal Services	Legal services	nonprofit
Regional Office of Education	Public education	county and state
Remedies Renewing Lives	Case management Education Advocacy Emergency housing (domestic violence focus)	nonprofit
Rockford Fire Department	Code Enforcement Emergency fire and paramedical services	city department
Rockford Housing Authority	Housing vouchers Landlord connector	municipal corporation
Rockford Rescue Mission	Case Management Transitional Housing Emergency Housing Day-center & Food Employment & Training Religious services	Christian mission
Rockford Township	Township administration (excepting Rockford city)	governance
Rosecrance	Behavioral health Addiction & substance abuse	nonprofit
Shelter Care Ministries	Emergency Housing Transitional Housing Rapid Rehousing Permanent Supportive Housing Day-center & Food Religious services	religious mission
St Elizabeth Center	Emergency assistance (e.g. shelter, pantry, meals, clothing) plus youth and community services and outreach	Christian mission
United Way of Rock River Valley	Employment & Training Legal support	nonprofit

Village of Machesney Park	Town administration	governance
Winnebago County Health Department	Funding for health programs	county
Winnebago/Boone County Housing Authority	Housing vouchers Landlord connector	county
Winnebago County State's Attorney's Office	Legal services	county
Youth Action Board		
Youth Services Network	Emergency Housing Transitional Housing Permanent Supportive Housing Counselling & Case Management Legal services	State-licensed child welfare agency

**Appendix 2** Veterans (Disidentified) on Rockford BNL, September 2020

<b>Name</b>	XXXX	XXXX	XXXX	XXXX	XXXX
<b>Date identified</b>	1/11/2019	1/11/19	7/5/2019	7/31/2019	9/16/20
<b>Verified Homeless status?</b>	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
<b>Homeless Situation at Identification</b>	Friends/Family	Friends/Family	Streets	Shelter	Place not meant for human habitation
<b>Days on List</b>	616	616	441	415	2
<b>List Status at time of check-in (TH=Transitional Housing)</b>	Active-TH	Active-TH	Active-TH	Active-TH	Active-Unsheltered
<b>Date Active list updated</b>	8/26/2019	5/3/2019	7/10/2019	9/19/2019	
<b>Specific location if unsheltered</b>					Davis park-2003 Red Chevy Blazer
<b>This week's obstacle to housing (system, not client)</b>	TH	TH	Obtaining VASH	TH	
<b>Next Step</b>	Using VASH to move-looking for unit		Looking for housing--WCHA has VASH vouchers avail		apt with CAM 9/22
<b>By when?</b>	11/1/2020		9/1/2020		
<b>By Whom (Staff initials)</b>	GPD		GPD		
<b>Target Permanent Housing (PH) move in date</b>	11/1/2020	12/31/2020	9/1/2020		
<b>Date of PH</b>					
<b>PH Destination at exit</b>					
<b>Monthly Income</b>	\$3,100	\$0	\$771	\$0	\$1,500
<b>Race</b>	White	African American	White	White	White
<b>Ethnicity</b>	Non-Hispanic	Non-Hispanic	Non-Hispanic	Non-Hispanic	Non-Hispanic
<b>Disability?</b>	Yes-MH	Yes-MH	Yes-MH	No	Yes-MH+
<b>Household Size</b>	1	1	1	1	1
<b>Household Composition</b>	Single	Single	Single	Single	Single
<b>Number of Bedrooms Needed</b>	1	1	1	1	1
<b>Returns to Homelessness</b>	0	0	0	0	1

Source: Jennifer Jaeger, Rockford Department of Human Services

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Julia Parshall interview with case writers, November 28, 2019.

<sup>2</sup> Community Solutions press release, December 18, 2015, "Spotlight: Rockford, IL Becomes First Community to Reach Functional Zero for Veteran Homelessness"

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.