

# Editorial: Finally, Someone has Lit a Fire Under the VA to Get homeless Veterans Housed

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It was heartening to hear Department of Veterans Affairs Secretary Denis McDonough recently announce an ambitious but doable goal: to house — in permanent homes, not just temporary motel rooms — 500 homeless veterans in the Los Angeles area by the end of the year. He also pledged to get temporary housing, at least, for the 40-some people, mostly veterans and their partners, living in a tent encampment along a stretch of San Vicente Boulevard in Brentwood that borders the campus of the West L.A. VA.

Timelines for housing veterans have come and gone before. In 2015, L.A. Mayor Eric Garcetti vowed to house every homeless veteran in the city but backed off when the count that year showed veteran homelessness had risen 6%. We welcome the renewed urgency and hope this time the promise is kept.

Since then, the rise in veteran homelessness in L.A. County has abated — but even as veterans get housed, others become unhoused. About 3,900 veterans in L.A. County remain unhoused, according to the most recent count in 2020.

The VA says it housed 1,283 veterans from Oct. 1, 2020 to Sept. 30, 2021. Which raises the question of just how many veterans remain unhoused in L.A. County? No one has an up-to-date answer, but it's certainly more than 500.

Now there are enormous resources on hand for veterans, including more than 1,300 rental vouchers set aside for veterans, according to officials of the Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority. And that doesn't count the veterans with vouchers in hand who can't find an apartment that they can afford or a landlord willing to take them.

But the hurdles are still high. Service providers must help veterans collect important documents, and VA social workers must assess their mental and physical well-being as well as help with their paperwork. LAHSA even got DMV staff to visit the encampment last week to work with vets on getting IDs. And service providers or VA staff must take veterans to visit potential temporary and permanent housing sites.

Some service providers working alongside VA staff say the VA's peer support specialists do a good job of intensively engaging veterans — but they say the VA social workers aren't doing enough field work, instead spending a lot of time working remotely, contacting people by phone. (Yes, homeless people have phones, but they get lost or stolen or don't always work.) The VA disputes that, saying its social workers have been back in the field for six months. However, the VA is plagued by a 20% shortage in social workers.

Well, here's the bottom line — this work can't be done over the phone by a short-staffed crew. The VA has contracted with service providers to assist, but to get the veterans in the encampment temporarily settled and another 500 veterans permanently housed by the end of the year will take, well, an army of people. If the VA needs to hire more social workers, the secretary should see that that gets done quickly.

At the Brentwood encampment, some campers have been reluctant to leave. “You can't overstate the community of the encampment,” one service provider observed. But most are moving on.

“I'm grateful for anything,” said camp resident Coco Garcia on Wednesday, as she speedily packed up belongings to go off to a motel in Lakewood — not her first-choice location. But, she said, “It is what it is.”