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# Are Tiny Home Villages an Effective Tool in the Fight Against Veteran Homelessness?

November 1, 2023

HIGHLIGHTS **II** ○ ○ ○ ● ○ ○

Benefits include low-barrier to entry, privacy and secure shelter, onsite medical care and improved contact with the VA.



*Pallet shelter village in Alexandria Park, Los Angeles. Similar to the village constructed for homeless veterans at the VA campus in Los Angeles. (Madeline Tolle / Pallet)*

## Executive Summary

Created in April 2020, the Veterans Affairs (VA) of Greater Los Angeles' Care, Treatment, and Rehabilitation Service (CTRS) program was founded in association with Village for Vets, a Los Angeles-based 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization, in response to the increasing number of veterans experiencing homelessness during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The CTRS program is a "low-barrier-to-entry transitional housing initiative"<sup>[1]</sup> that provides temporary housing, healthcare, showers, meals, case management and peer support.<sup>[2]</sup> Initially consisting of a "safe camping area" in a parking lot at the VA's medical center campus in West LA, the program expanded in November 2021 to include Pallet Shelters, known as tiny homes, that contain a bed, climate control, windows, electrical power outlets and a locking door.<sup>[3][4]</sup>

Funding for these shelters was originally provided by Village for Vets, with funding for 25 of the first 28 shelters being donated to the organization by former California Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger.<sup>[5][6][7]</sup> By March 2022, through the work of Village for Vets, AyZar Outreach, Brentwood School, UCLA, Lennar and HomeAid, there were 110 shelters in place plus an additional two 800-square-foot dining halls.<sup>[8]</sup>

According to the VA, "the program's goal is to improve unsheltered Veterans' healthcare outcomes in a harm reduction environment, while moving participants toward permanent housing solutions."<sup>[9]</sup>

A-Mark Foundation funded research by Pepperdine University graduate students to determine the program's cost-effectiveness, effectiveness at addressing the underlying issue of homelessness among veterans, and the impact of its service delivery model. The study also hoped to make recommendations for the program's scalability and applicability.

Four masters students, Arif Husein, Maddie Leonardi, Clare McKenzie and Aemon Viens, conducted the research under the supervision of their advisor, Professor Marlon Graf, PhD. Additional data was provided directly to A-Mark Foundation from Village for Vets.

Five stakeholders in the program were surveyed, including program administrators, funders and local community members. Through these interviews, the students found that the low-barrier to entry housing CTRS program is essential in helping get some veterans off the streets. Their research showed that CTRS is preferable to other housing options because veterans get their own secured space and it is located close to healthcare amenities at the VA campus, which improves veteran access to care.

Despite these positives, there are challenges and room for improvement. A lack of staff capacity at the program means that a number of housing units are left empty while some veterans are turned away if arriving outside of certain hours. Other problems include a lack of help for veterans facing eviction from the program, especially in terms of finding new accommodation or challenging their eviction, demonstrating the need for more onsite programs such as legal clinics.

The students were unable, despite repeated requests, to obtain comprehensive funding and budgetary information or utilization data from the VA and therefore could not conduct an accurate cost-analysis or provide recommendations for the program's scalability and applicability.

According to Village for Vets, there has been a 6.1% decrease in veteran homelessness in Los Angeles between 2020 and 2022 thanks to the collaborative efforts of the VA and partner nonprofits like Village for Vets.<sup>[10][11]</sup>

The Pepperdine student's presentation of their results and policy analysis is titled, "Evaluation of the Care, Treatment and Rehabilitative Services (CTRS) Program."

## Methodology

The students used a mixed-method approach to their research, combining qualitative semi-structured interviews with CTRS stakeholders and an in-depth cost analysis.

The students interviewed five stakeholders from partner organizations involved in the integration of the CTRS program, current CTRS program administrators and funders, and community members in the vicinity of the Veterans Affairs West Los Angeles campus. The interviews provided insight into the current program, its effectiveness, and some of the challenges associated with running the program.

The interviews were conducted virtually, lasting between 30 minutes and one hour, and followed a semi-structured protocol that differed between the three different types of interviewees. The interviews included questions that focused on program knowledge, descriptions of their involvement with CTRS, and individual definitions of success and failure.

Prior to commencing the study, the research project was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Pepperdine University.

## Results

### Qualitative Research Surveys

Throughout the five interviews undertaken by the students, the interviewees expressed a mixed view of the success of the CTRS program. While all were grateful to the program and noted key successes, barriers and challenges were identified, including empty units and lack of staff.

One interviewee summed up the program by saying: "The program has been successful in managing a low-barrier-to-entry program and serving different populations, but faces challenges in balancing future planning with creating infrastructure." Another said, "I'm thankful that the program is there to get people off the street because it's what's needed. ... [but] from a perspective of looking at it from a big picture, they need to be filling those units and keeping it staffed,... Just keep a constant flow going if the goal really is to end veteran homelessness."

### Key Perceived Successes of the CTRS Program

#### I. Low-Barrier-to-Entry Housing Is Needed

Many of the interviewees noted the need for low-barrier housing programs like the accommodation provided by the CTRS program. The CTRS program at the VA campus in West LA is the only program of its type supported by the VA in southern California.

One interviewee noted the veteran's preference for the program due to its low-barrier access and lack of rules. Spouses and service animals are also welcome.

Another interviewee noted its importance being amplified by the fact that many of the veteran beneficiaries of the program suffer from mental health issues that result in repeated discharges from other housing programs.<sup>[12]</sup>

“Stable housing can help veterans address medical and behavioral health issues and decrease their need for services. Getting veterans into low barrier housing ... can provide a foot in the door to accessing other services.”

“It started as a tent camping project where veterans were given a tiny tent and allowed to camp on campus. And then it quickly became, evident, I guess, that this was, you know, a preferred place for veterans to go, because it was low-barrier and there weren't a lot of rules.”

“The program has scaled up significantly from serving a handful of residents to over 120 residents.”

The program also helped to provide safe transitional housing for unhoused veterans living in an encampment along San Vicente Blvd outside of the VA campus in West LA, benefitting not only the veterans but the local residents and businesses.

“With the creation of CTRS, VA was able to reduce impacts on the surrounding community. Before CTRS, there was a large homeless encampment along San Vicente Blvd on the western boundary of the VA West LA Campus, which severely impacted pedestrians, residents, and businesses by blocking the public right of way/sidewalk. The encampment was also a public health hazard, with concerns raised from residents and business owners in the area.”

#### II. Tiny Homes Provide Unique Benefits When Compared to Other Programs

It was noted by some interviewees that many other programs use barrack-style accommodations for their temporary housing programs that can be retraumatizing for veterans. Tiny homes are preferred by the veterans themselves and it was noted that tiny homes, rather than congregate living arrangements, better prepare veterans for the privacy of their own space when they move into permanent houses or apartments.

“I'm thankful ... because veterans can come in and get off the street and get their own privacy. They're much safer ... they get connected with their social workers, and

“CTRS is the only place where you can have your own space and you don't share with anyone. ... The VA quickly realized that people were self-selecting to want

they work on a housing plan.”

to go in there as opposed to any other program.”

### III. Services Provided On-Site and Close to the VA Buildings Positively Impact Veteran Experience with the VA

A couple of interviewees noted the importance of having on-site services at the CTRS shelter program for the veterans as well as the benefits of being in such close proximity to the in-building services at the VA campus. Specifically nurse practitioners working in a “street medicine” program on-site are particularly welcome.

“The reason why we need housing on the property is because a lot of these veterans, they get all their benefits, their medical care from the VA, so if you take someone that is disabled or mentally ill and you stick them in an apartment 10 miles away by themselves, with no support network, no vehicle to get back to the VA, a lot of times they fall back into homelessness.”

“They’re just an incredible group of practitioners,... I just find them to be very attentive and consistent, and have really good follow through with the veterans that are in their clinic, which is as it should be because they are high needs, and they are homeless.”

### Challenges and Recommendations for Improving the CTRS Program

#### I. Ensure Tiny Homes Are Filled to Capacity and the CTRS Program Is Sufficiently Staffed

A number of interviewees noted that there are 30 to 40 empty tiny homes every night, but the VA says that they don’t have enough staff to fill or manage them. Interviewees recommended an increase in hiring for more on-site staff to manage intake and exit paperwork.

“Having adequate staffing there, and incentives for staff to be there, so that way units aren’t going unused. I think that’s one of the big things that needs to happen.”

“Shortage of staff is also a problem at times, leading to occasional service delivery issues.”

#### II. Reduce the Number of Veterans Turned Away from the Program

Some of the interviewees told the researchers that at times, veterans have been turned away from the CTRS program leading to a loss in trust between the veterans and the VA. The researchers discovered that in order to register with the program a veteran had to arrive within a certain time frame and if they arrived after that time, they would be turned away and told to come back the next day, especially if the six drop-in units were full. The interviewees recommended an extension of the hours of operation for registration and an increase in drop-in units.

“If veterans were showing up past like 2:30 PM, they were being told to come back the following day. ... Then they would be out on the sidewalk. And then, as you can imagine, at that point, it’s much harder to get them back in, because the trust was severed.”

#### III. Ensure Discharged Veterans Have Help Finding Replacement Shelter

A number of interviewees commented about the importance of a coordinated exit process for veterans facing eviction and noted that, at times, the help to find new accommodation is not always forthcoming. It was also noted that there is not a formal appeals process for veterans who dispute charges against them.

Recommendations for improvement include, ensuring the exit process is implemented thoroughly and completely; creating more low-barrier housing opportunities for chronically unhoused veterans and those struggling with their mental health; and investigating all discharges due to bad behavior and try to minimize the amount of veterans evicted for internal policy violations.

“If they’re kicked out for a policy violation or anything like that, they’ll just hold their property for up to 30 days. They’re supposed to connect them to another housing location. Sometimes they don’t do that well, they’re not really good at following through on that. So that’s something I want to see happen better.”



#### IV. Increase On-Site Services for Veterans and Incentives for Staff to Work There

As mentioned above, services provided to veterans on-site and in close proximity to in-building services markedly improve veteran experience with the VA and help keep them in the program. Recommendations for improvement included increasing the types of services provided on-site as well as improving the incentive for VA staff to work on-site with the veterans, which has been noted as being challenging at times.

“I think they can do better in terms of having people come right to them and do, for example, legal clinics at the CTRS. So the veterans can ask the lawyers questions and get help with any legal issues. Just bring everything there and see if you give them a service model that is more successful than others.”

“Nobody wants to go work there,... because it has had the reputation of just being really difficult and challenging.”

#### Quantitative Data Analysis

The researchers urged the VA and other stakeholders to provide data on the utilization of the CTRS program, including how many occupants CTRS has, how many exits CTRS has (broken down by reason/destination), the average length of stay, the average occupancy rate, and what services are provided to residents as well as who provides those services. They were also hoping to gain cost metrics including fixed costs (construction, gas, water, electricity, internet, insurance, etc.) and variable costs (food, services, ongoing operational costs such as operations and management, etc.) to assess the cost-effectiveness of the program, but the VA did not share this information.

Since the completion of the student project, some data has been provided to A-Mark, but not enough to perform a complete analysis.

In an email to the A-Mark Foundation in August 2023, Village for Vets provided the following information:

- There were 1,087 veteran admissions to the program alongside 39 spouse admissions between April 2020 and August 2023.
- 758 of these admissions were for a first-time veteran participant, alongside 32 first-time spouses.
- Gender breakdown: 680 males, 73 females, 5 unspecified.
- The average length of stay is 171 days.
- 108 (14%) of the veterans have moved to Veterans Affairs Supportive Housing (VASH) apartments; 53 (7%) have been reunited with families.
- CTRS works on finding appropriate housing so they do not have a direct “discharged back to homelessness” number.
- All Veterans at CTRS receive VA healthcare.<sup>[13]</sup>

#### Total Number Admissions to the CTRS Program, April 2020 - August 2023

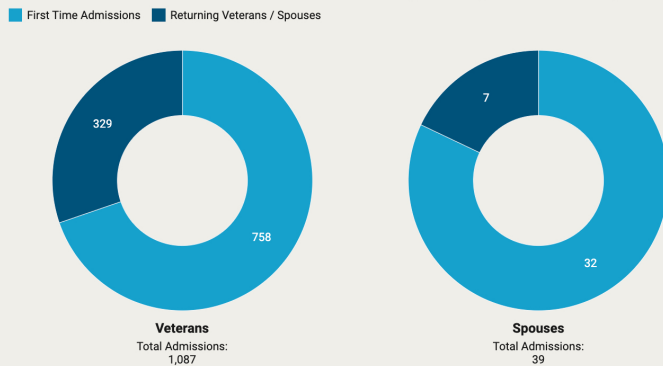


Chart: A-Mark Foundation • Source: Village for Vets • [Get the data](#) • [Download image](#) • Created with [Datawrapper](#)

#### Percentage of Veterans Who Have Moved from CTRS to Supportive Housing, April 2020 - August 2023

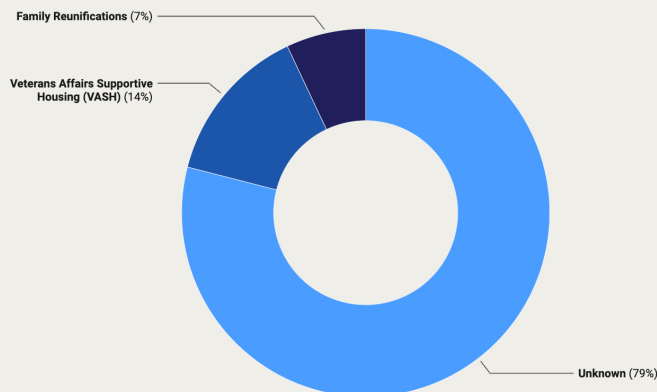


Chart: A-Mark Foundation • Source: Village for Vets • [Get the data](#) • Created with [Datawrapper](#)

A study published in July 2023 by researchers at the VA's HSR&D Center for the Study of Healthcare Innovation in Los Angeles in collaboration with researchers from UCLA found that the CTRS program was staffed by two full-time social workers, two full-time peer



support workers, a part-time preventive medicine physician and a part-time occupational therapist. Biweekly primary care and triages were also held. Services included substance use groups, a healthy teaching kitchen, a storytelling group, a music therapy group, acupuncture, and veteran town halls. Weekly COVID testing was undertaken during the pandemic as were intermittent vaccination clinics.<sup>[14]</sup>

The VA-UCLA study found that between 4/1/2020 and 10/1/2021 there were 491 veterans admitted to the CTRS program, 110 of which had been admitted before. The average length of stay was 35 days however the range of time spent in the program was one day to over a year.<sup>[15]</sup>

While the students did use a previous [A-Mark Foundation](#) report to produce an estimated annual operating cost for the CTRS program (\$4,025,950 a year or \$11,030 per night), without the ability to compare these costs with positive outcomes for veterans, especially regarding access to healthcare and exit to permanent housing, an actual cost-effectiveness analysis cannot be made.

## Conclusion

The purpose of this project was to understand the effectiveness of the VAs CTRS tiny homes for veterans program. While the lack of available quantitative data made it impossible to undertake a cost-effectiveness survey, interviews with stakeholders involved with the project provided insight into the benefits and challenges of the program. It was not clear whether the VA did not have the data to provide for analysis or if the information exists but was not shared.

Regarding quantitative findings, future research is needed to obtain more specific quantitative data to determine the effectiveness of CTRS.

While the students were unable to provide recommendations for the program's scalability, they did conclude that, "expanding Los Angeles' current tiny homes model may come with many advantages," noting that, in theory, tiny homes can meet the increasing need for more affordable housing in towns and cities nationwide while providing people with homes with less costly maintenance and a safe space to store belongings.

Cite This Page

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