

# **Pierce County Veterans' Needs Assessment**

## **Special Study**

**for Pierce County Performance Audit Committee**

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## Executive Summary

The Pierce County Veterans' Bureau provides relief services to indigent veterans residing in Pierce County. Recent trends and developments have created an opportunity to revisit the scope of Pierce County veterans' needs and available services. This report is mandated by a supplemental budget passed by the Pierce County Council. In a competitive process, the Performance Audit Committee selected contractor Donald A. Lachman and Associates to conduct the needs assessment.

The Pierce County Veterans' Bureau administers two primary programs:

- Veterans' Assistance Fund, which provides emergency relief for rent, food, and utilities to indigent veterans and their family members
- Veterans Incarcerated Program, which assists veterans in the Pierce County jail.

Funding for veterans' services comes mainly from a share of the local property tax, as authorized under Chapter 73.08 RCW. State law requires each county to collect a veterans' service tax of at least one and one-eighth cents (.00125) per thousand dollars of assessed valuation. However, the Pierce County rate last exceeded the statutory minimum in 2001. After the passage of Initiative 747, the veterans' tax rate declined each year until it reached .0072 in 2007.

The County Council provided additional funding in 2007 and 2008 from the General Fund, allowing the Veterans' Bureau to increase services. However, there is still a large unmet need.

Chapter II of the report explains in detail the funding and services provided by the Pierce County Veterans' Bureau, with attention also to services by other local organizations. Chapter III briefly discusses services to veterans in other counties.

In 2005, the State Legislature revised the statutes governing county veterans' bureaus. Since 2005, the more populous counties have been moving to broaden their range of services and their approaches to delivering those services. Some of these counties are expanding the population they serve to include homeless veterans.

Veterans' bureaus in the counties that were studied utilize a variety of approaches to delivering services. Some counties centralize delivery of many services through their veterans' bureaus, while other bureaus are limited to providing relief vouchers.

Pierce County is home to an estimated 3,000 indigent veterans, of whom approximately 900 are homeless, including an estimated 300 high needs chronically homeless veterans. One of the greatest struggles faced by indigent veterans is obtaining stable, affordable housing. Veterans are over represented in homeless and chronically homeless populations. Pierce County's housing market provides little

access to affordable housing. Housing is consistently listed as the top need of homeless veterans.

Other high priority needs of Indigent veterans include:

- Employment referrals, training for living wage jobs, and education
- Mental health and substance abuse treatment
- Medical and dental care
- Outreach
- Case management
- Discharge upgrade assistance and eligibility assistance
- Transportation.

The consultants found that Pierce County veterans' services experience gaps in resources, services, and coordination. Recommendations include:

1. Hire a senior planner for the Veterans' Bureau to coordinate with housing and social service providers to create a countywide veterans' services system with the goal of lifting veterans and their families out of indigence and raising the priority on housing and serving veterans.
2. Increase Pierce County Veterans' Bureau funding to enable contracting for services with community-based veterans' service providers, including:
  - Outreach
  - Case management
  - Discharge upgrades
  - Eligibility assistance
  - Transportation assistance
  - Employment assistance.
3. Provide incentives and assistance to encourage low-income housing development.
4. Spearhead creation of a permanent supportive housing development for high needs chronically homeless people.
5. Pursue and engage a low-income housing developer to apply for VA Grant and Per Diem funds, perhaps offering Pierce County Veterans' Bureau dollars to meet the gap between VA funds and operating costs.
6. Create a phased strategy of resource realignment from emergency services to services that stabilize veterans and reduce indigence.

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## Chapter I: Background

### A. Introduction

The Pierce County Veterans' Bureau provides "relief" services to indigent veterans, mainly in the form of rent, food, and utility vouchers. Veterans' relief is funded through a property tax levy.

Recent developments and trends have created a context for revisiting the scope of Pierce County veterans' needs and available services. These include:

- Federal and state funding opportunities
- 2005 state legislation revising legal provisions for county veterans' bureaus
- Increasing numbers and needs of veterans as a result of American military engagements
- Growing number of homeless veterans, and
- Emergence of a substantial population of high-needs chronically homeless veterans.

This report is mandated by a supplemental budget passed by the Pierce County Council in August 2007 (Ordinance No. 2007-54s). The Council directed the Performance Audit Committee to coordinate a study of programs and services needed by indigent veterans in Pierce County. According to the ordinance, the study is to include a needs assessment, estimated costs of needed programs, and funding recommendations.

In a competitive process, the Performance Audit Committee selected contractor Donald A. Lachman and Associates to conduct the needs assessment. Data collection and analysis for the project took place between October and December 2007.

### B. Project Objectives

1. Identify all existing services for indigent veterans in Pierce County (provided by the County and by others), quantify the level of service provided, and assess the unmet need for services.
2. Envision and describe a coordinated services system for Pierce County indigent veterans including County, City of Tacoma, state and federal resources and activities; outline the existing components of such a system;

and identify gaps and types of services or coordination needed to close the gaps and achieve a comprehensive, coordinated system.

3. Benchmark Pierce County efforts against those of comparable counties in Washington.
4. Identify appropriate funding levels to meet existing need.
5. Provide useful recommendations for action by Pierce County.

## **C. Methodology**

Consultants Donald Lachman and Colleen Laing conducted an environmental scan of services for indigent Pierce County veterans. Data collected included veterans' services and needs from a broad array of local agencies through databases, interviews, national research publications, literature on program outcomes, and budget information.

Interviews were conducted with key stakeholders, including governmental, private non-profit, and service organizations who serve Pierce County veterans. Stakeholder input helped guide the prioritization of service needs, identify systems gaps and opportunities, and provide practical perspectives on service delivery. After analyzing the data, the consultants conferred with key stakeholders to ensure accurate data interpretation.

Additionally, the consultants contacted veterans' services staff and others in seven Washington counties to identify veterans' services and systems and collect information on promising practices. As a result of these efforts, this report contains information on existing types and levels of services and resources available to indigent veterans in other Washington counties.

## **D. Services to Veterans**

Individual veterans may receive direct services (and local veterans' programs may receive funding) from federal, state, or local government agencies.

At the federal level, the U.S. Department of Veterans' Affairs (VA) provides medical, mental health, chemical dependency, pension, and other benefits directly to veterans. Pierce County is served by the VA facility at American Lake. The VA also funds local non-profit housing developers to build or rehabilitate housing for veterans and provides funds to enrich such housing with services for residents. The VA also works with other federal agencies to target resources for veterans.

At the state level, the Washington Department of Veterans' Affairs (WDVA) provides outreach, claims assistance, cash assistance, counseling, vocational, and housing programs directly to veterans. The WDVA is rehabilitating the Orting Soldiers Home and Colony into affordable housing for veterans and a site for work therapy, respite care, and educational services. The WDVA also funds and coordinates services with county veterans' bureaus to transition incarcerated veterans to stable living situations outside of county jails.

At the local level, county veterans' bureaus across Washington serve indigent veterans through widely varying approaches. Some county veterans' bureaus are central coordinators of most county-funded veterans' services, and they serve both housed and homeless veterans. Other veterans' bureaus focus on relief vouchers, which tend to benefit veterans who have housing. In addition, non-profit agencies serve low-income veterans at the local level.

Finally, federal, state, and local programs for low-income individuals serve veterans as well as the general population.

## **E. Organization of the Report**

In Chapter Two, *Services to Veterans in Pierce County*, this report discusses the Pierce County Veterans' Bureau and other organizations in Pierce County.

In Chapter Three, *Services to Veterans in Other Counties*, the report describes the size of the veterans' population, tax rates, and the scope of veterans' bureau services in several other Washington counties.

Chapter Four, *Needs Assessment*, identifies veterans' service needs, existing system capacity, and gaps in resources, services or coordination.

Finally, in Chapter Five, *Conclusions and Recommendations*, the report discusses the consultant's conclusions about veterans' services and funding in Pierce County and the recommendations that flow from them.

## **Chapter II: Services to Veterans in Pierce County**

### **A. Local Funding and Services: Pierce County Veterans' Bureau**

The Pierce County Veterans' Bureau administers two primary programs:

1. Veterans' Assistance Fund, which provides emergency relief to indigent veterans and their family members
2. Veterans Incarcerated Program, which assists veterans in the Pierce County jail.

The Bureau also provides funding for the annual veterans' stand-down event, a small number of medical relief vouchers, and referrals to housing, mental health, employment, medical, and chemical dependency services provided by other agencies.

The Pierce County Veterans' Bureau has three staff members. In addition, the agency has one contract staff position to run the Veterans Incarcerated Program (funded by a contract with the Washington Department of Veterans Affairs). The Bureau's 2008 budget is \$914,410.

"Indigent" veterans are supported under the provisions of Chapter 73.08 RCW. The law allows county veterans' bureaus to select from several definitions of indigence. Most counties, including Pierce, use the definition of 150 percent of federal poverty guidelines: \$10,210 per year for a single adult, or \$20,650 for a family of four.<sup>1</sup> There are some exceptions that allow relief to be provided to veterans who have income at 200 percent of the federal poverty guidelines.

Under Chapter 73.08 RCW, each county is required to establish a veterans' assistance fund, establish a veterans' advisory board, and provide services to indigent veterans, funded by a share of the local property tax.

State law requires counties to collect a veterans' services tax ranging from a low of one and one-eighth cents (.01125) to a high of 27 cents per thousand dollars of assessed property valuation. Passage of Initiative 747 in 2001 limited the growth in property tax revenue to a maximum of one percent annually. As a result, the portion of the local levy allocated to veterans' services has declined to a rate of .0072 (2007). That is considerably less than the statutory minimum rate of one and an eighth cents per thousand dollars of assessed valuation (.01125).

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<sup>1</sup> Federal Register, Vol. 72, No. 15, January 24, 2007, pp. 3147–3148

The tax levy for veterans' relief programs is a small portion of local property tax. For a Pierce County home with a total assessed value of \$300,000, the tax based on the 2007 rate would be \$2.16. If based on the statutory minimum, the tax would be \$3.38.<sup>2</sup>

The following exhibits provide a portrait of the funding and services in recent years.

Exhibit 1 – Pierce County millage rates for veterans' relief since 2001.

Exhibit 2 – Millage revenue and Veterans' Bureau expenditures since 2004.

Exhibit 3 – Veterans' Bureau expenditures by type since 2004.

Exhibit 4 – Veterans' relief expenditures since 2004.

### Exhibit 1

#### Millage Rates, Pierce County Veterans' Assistance Fund

Year	Rate per \$1,000
2001	.0116
2002	.0107
2003	.0105
2004	.0099
2005	.0095
2006	.0083
2007	.0072

As shown above, the local tax rate in 2001 was .0116. That was the last time the rate exceeded the statutory minimum of .01125.

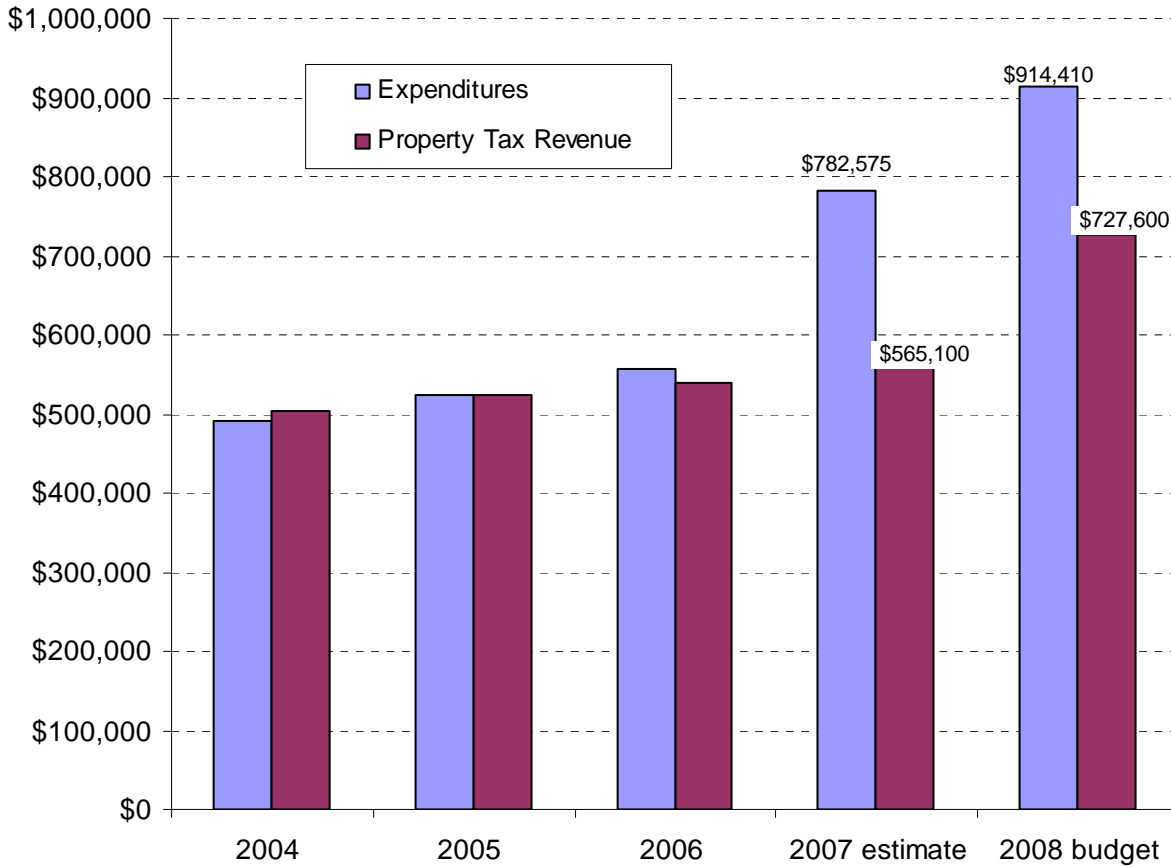
In 2007, to supplement the revenue from millage, the Pierce County Council appropriated to the Veterans' Bureau an additional \$186,810 from the General Fund, raising the annual budget to \$825,760. This action increased annual funding for the Veterans' Bureau to the equivalent of a tax rate of .0104 per one thousand dollars of assessed value. Estimated annual expenditures are \$782,575, which is less than the full budgeted amount.

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<sup>2</sup> The calculation is  $300 \times .0072 = \$2.16$ .  
For the statutory minimum,  $300 \times .01125 = \$3.38$ .

## Exhibit 2

### Revenue and Expenditures, Pierce County Veterans' Bureau

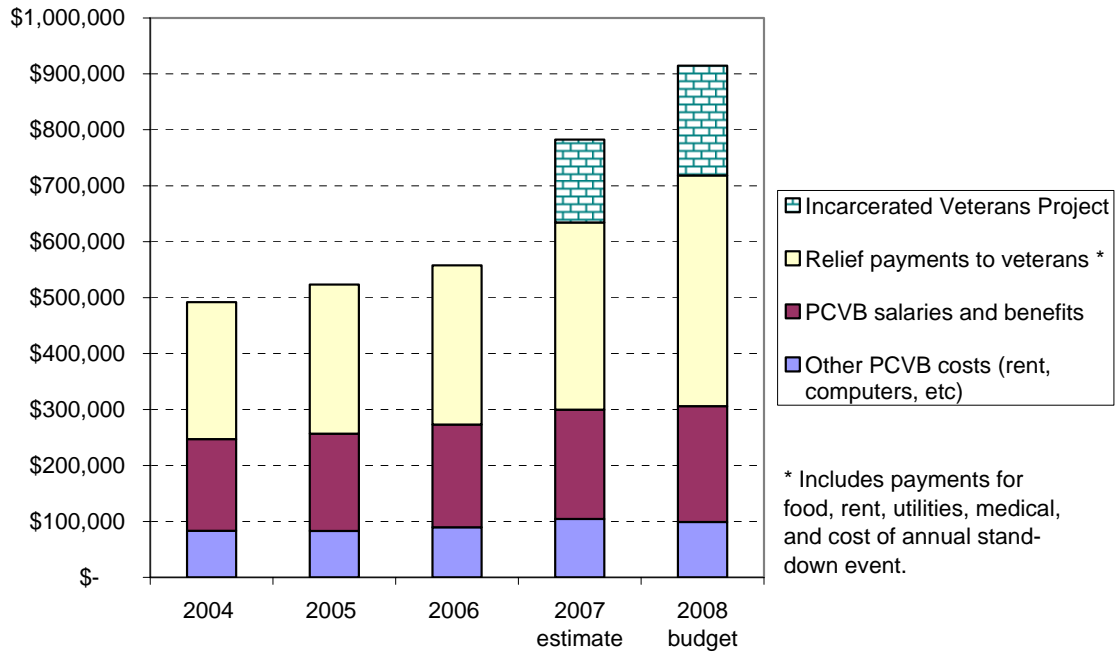


In 2006, fund reserve was used to support expenditures that exceeded the current year's tax revenue by a small amount. In 2007, as previously mentioned, the Council provided a supplemental appropriation from the General Fund.

As shown in Exhibits 3, Veterans' Bureau funding is used for staff costs, direct services, contracted services, and overhead costs such as rent, supplies, and equipment. Exhibit 4 provides further detail by showing the amounts spent for various types of veterans' relief.

### Exhibit 3

#### Expenditures by Type, Pierce County Veterans' Bureau



### Exhibit 4

#### Relief Vouchers, Pierce County Veterans' Bureau

Year	Food	Rent	Utility	Medical & Miscellaneous
2004	\$121,994	\$68,219	\$33,710	\$7,002
2005	\$115,458	\$80,368	\$40,055	\$10,011
2006	\$118,853	\$86,256	\$50,606	\$13,519
2007 estimate	\$132,453	\$112,462	\$68,288	\$10,219

In 2002, the legislature expanded eligibility for the relief program to include National Guard members and reservists. Since that time, the Pierce County Veterans' Bureau has annually issued 1,750 to 2,000 relief vouchers.

Approximately 900 of Pierce County's estimated 3,000 indigent veterans receive relief vouchers each year. Demand for assistance has consistently exceeded the Bureaus' available funding. The number of relief vouchers issued has been growing, mainly in rent and utility vouchers, as shown in Exhibit 4 (previous page).

Most veterans served by the Veterans' Bureau have housing, as relief vouchers may have little value to homeless veterans.

In 2005, the Washington State Legislature passed House Bill (HB) 1189 to do the following:

- Improve county veterans bureaus' services to veterans
- Enable contracting for services
- Advance a broader interpretation of veterans considered eligible for county services (to include homeless veterans), and
- Require formal communications and involvement between veterans' bureaus' advisory boards and local elected officials.

As a result of HB 1189, counties have flexibility in planning and implementing services to meet the current needs of veterans, including homeless veterans. This allows the Pierce County Veterans' Bureau to utilize County resources for the neediest veterans. It also allows the Bureau to provide funding to agencies with expertise, access to the most needy clients, and proven track records. However, additional funding is needed to utilize this flexibility.

Since passage of HB 1189, the Bureau and its Advisory Board have begun to explore opportunities to expand the range of services provided by the Bureau and focus on serving eligible veterans with the greatest needs. The Bureau has developed new partnerships with providers, including the Washington Department of Veterans Affairs, County Corrections, the Metropolitan Development Council of Tacoma / Pierce County, and veterans' service organizations.

In 2006, the Veterans' Bureau initiated the Veterans Incarcerated Project (VIP) in collaboration with the Washington Department of Veterans' Affairs. According to the project's October 2007 report, veterans are the largest single group in most county jail systems.

VIP educates incarcerated veterans about benefits and assistance, determines and facilitates eligibility for social services, identifies risks and barriers associated with criminal behaviors, and develops and implements case management plans for participants. Since the program's inception in 2007, 87 enrollments have occurred. These enrollments have resulted in 2,245 early release days, 14 housing placements, and 22 substance abuse treatment referrals. Only two of 87 program enrollees have recidivated in the first year of operation.

## **B. Services to Veterans by Other Local Organizations**

The needs of indigent veterans are similar to those of other low-income Pierce County residents, with some denser needs for health, mental health care, and substance abuse treatment. Indigent veterans are often served by programs serving all low-income populations, but few programs focus specifically on the needs of veterans or provide a priority to veterans.

The following is a partial list of programs and resources serving indigent veterans in Pierce County.

### **Project for Assistance with Transition from Homelessness (PATH)**

PATH is a federally funded outreach program operated by Comprehensive Mental Health. PATH clients must meet the following criteria:

- Serious mental illness
- Homeless, and
- Unconnected with mental health services.

This population includes some of the most difficult people to engage in social services. Karen Wild, a PATH Program supervisor, indicates that almost 20 percent of PATH's caseload is comprised of homeless veterans. Many of these individuals distrust military and mental health providers, complicating their access to benefits and services.

Once participants are enrolled, PATH's team provides mental health and substance abuse treatment, housing and case management. PATH staff members meet clients where they are comfortable: in clinics, libraries, hospitals, soup kitchens, woods, and under bridges. They typically contact 70-80 people per month, a small number of who will meet PATH eligibility criteria. Following enrollment, the goal is to transition participants from the PATH project into traditional services within one year.

### **Metropolitan Development Council, Health Care for the Homeless (HCH)**

HCH served 159 homeless Pierce County veterans and provided 869 services to homeless veterans in 2006. HCH provides the following services:

- Medical services, referral and education
- Referrals to emergency dental services
- Intensive case management
- Mobile dental and medical vans (including a quarterly veterans-only van outing and two annual van support efforts for the Pierce County Veteran Coalition's stand-downs)
- Healthcare outreach countywide
- Chemical dependency counseling to assist with evaluations when the VA takes too long to schedule appointments
- Referrals to chemical dependency treatment with very little wait time
- Referrals to mental health counseling and medication through Greater Lakes Mental Health
- Wound care and diabetic foot care
- Housing referrals
- Referrals for veterans to long-term employers paying \$12-15 per hour
- Free lockers, mailing address, telephone access, showers, toiletries, access to laundry facilities, emergency clothing and female hygiene products
- Domestic violence counseling and referral
- Life skills education

### **South Sound Outreach**

South Sound Outreach serves seniors and disabled people including disabled veterans. Services available to indigent veterans include:

- Outreach services in conjunction with the Washington Department of Social and Health Services
- Ordering DD-214 (military discharge status) forms online
- Assisting in discharge upgrades to enable veterans to become eligible for Veterans' Administration, Washington Department of Veterans Affairs and Pierce County Veterans' Bureau services and benefits
- Providing referrals and enrollment assistance to other Pierce County veteran resources
- In some remote cases, transportation to American Lake Veterans' Hospital

### **County Veterans' Services Organizations**

Many Pierce County veterans and veterans' services providers access expertise and assistance Pierce County chapters of military service organizations, including:

1. AMVETS
2. American Legion
3. Disabled American Vets
4. Veterans of Foreign Wars
5. Veterans' Independent Enterprises of Washington
6. The Veterans' Center
7. Military Order of the Purple Heart
8. Key Peninsula Veterans Institute

### **Pierce County Community Services Department**

While the Pierce County Community Services Department is not a direct service provider, the Department manages state and federal housing funds including Section 2163 and 2060 funds (flexible housing assistance funds that counties are authorized to collect from additional document recording fees), Community Development Block Grant, McKinney Act homelessness assistance funds, and Emergency Shelter Grant program funds. The Department contracts for housing and shelter services through community-based nonprofit providers. Funded providers include shelters, transitional housing and permanent housing, none of which have a veteran preference.

### **Pierce County Housing Authority**

The Pierce County Housing Authority (PCHA), through funding from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), provides and manages subsidized housing for low-income Pierce County residents. PCHA also provides Section 8 housing subsidy vouchers, which enable recipients to rent private housing units. At one time the PCHA participated in collaboration with the U. S. Veterans' Administration and others who provided case management and dedicated housing vouchers. Veterans' groups maintain that the loss of these vouchers was a serious blow to housing veterans in Pierce County. HUD is currently considering reinstating dedicating housing vouchers for veterans.

## **City of Tacoma Human Services**

The City of Tacoma's Human Rights and Human Services Department funds a wide range of social services for Tacoma's low-income residents including:

- Housing assistance for individuals and families
- Emergency shelters
- Case management
- Employment
- Literacy
- Parent training
- Outreach
- Self-sufficiency training
- Emergency food
- Counseling
- Legal services
- Adult day care
- Domestic violence services
- Dental Services

Indigent veterans are served in these programs along with other low-income populations.

In September 2006, Tacoma initiated the Housing First Encampment Elimination Program to close 14 homeless encampments and help up to 100 homeless individuals move to permanent supportive housing. Comprehensive Mental Health's PATH Team conducts outreach to encampment residents to encourage them to move into permanent supportive housing, and the Metropolitan Development Council and Tacoma Rescue Mission provide services to participants. A quarter of the participants evaluated in this initiative identified themselves as veterans.

According to the City of Tacoma, participants are assigned case managers to coordinate mental health, substance abuse and other services and to serve as a liaison between landlords and participants. These supportive services are designed to ensure that participants will remain housed.

Funding partners, including the City of Tacoma, Pierce County, MultiCare, and the Franciscan Health system, have contributed \$1.3 million for the program's first year of operations.

## Chapter III: Local Veterans' Services in Other Washington Counties

Pierce County has a high proportion of residents who are veterans, as shown below.

### Exhibit 5

#### Veterans by County

County	Number of Veterans	Percentage of Population
King	138,690	9.7%
Pierce	93,159	16.7%
Snohomish	62,790	12.6%
Spokane	49,196	14.5%
Kitsap	39,925	22.7%
Clark	36,160	11.9%
Thurston	28,656	16.1%
Yakima	15,126	9.4%

2006 Census Data

Local tax rates for veterans' relief vary by county, and veterans' bureaus utilize a variety of approaches to deliver veterans' services. As Exhibit 7 shows, some counties centralize delivery of many services through their veterans' bureaus, while other bureaus provide only relief vouchers.

### Exhibit 6

#### Veterans' Bureau Services by County

Services / County	Pierce	King	Snohomish	Thurston	Kitsap	Yakima
Relief Services	√	√	√	√	√	√
Crisis/Trauma Services		√	√			√
Case Management		√	√	√		√
Mental Health Services		√	√			√
Transitional Housing or Shelter		√		√		√
Permanent Supportive Housing						√
Employment Services		√				
Life Skills		√	√			
Jail Program	√	√				
Eligibility Assistance		√	√	√		

Prior to the 2005 legislative changes, many veterans' bureaus were limited in their eligibility requirements, range of services, and expenditures. Tax revenues in some counties exceeded expenditures and resulted in large reserve funds.

Some counties delegated not only relief fund administration but also eligibility determination to veterans' services organizations such as the Veterans of Foreign Wars and the American Legion. Today, many of Washington's smaller and more rural counties continue to follow this model. More populous counties, however, have been moving since 2005 to broaden their range of services and their approaches to delivering those services. Many have also expanded the population they serve to include homeless veterans.

### Exhibit 7

#### Tax Rates and Revenue by County, 2007

County	Tax Rate (Millage)	Tax Revenue	Budget
Pierce	.0072	\$565,100	\$825,760
Snohomish	.00514308	\$432,659	\$740,000
Spokane	.019723	\$632,339	\$642,339
Thurston	.01125	\$257,675	\$539,202
Kitsap	.01	\$326,917	\$206,956
Clark	.006989	\$328,896	\$760,203
King	.0088	\$2,708,363	\$4,500,000

Notable features in Exhibit 7 are as follows:

- Pierce and Snohomish counties have added funding to their Veterans' Bureau budgets to supplement the amount available from property taxes. This is more critical in Snohomish County, where the veterans' tax rate is even lower than in Pierce County.
- Spokane County has a substantial tax rate for veterans' relief (1.97 cents per thousand), which raises more revenue than in Pierce County.
- The budgets in Thurston, Kitsap, and Clark counties were supported by current year tax revenue and income from reserve funds.
- Clark County spent down its reserve fund completely between 2005 and 2007. In 2008, the Clark County Veterans' Bureau will request from the county commissioners a levy rate increase (amount to be determined).

- King County is in a unique position after passing a levy that generates \$13.3 million per year. Half of the levy revenue is specifically dedicated for veterans' services. However, the King County Veterans' Bureau is unable to spend all of the available income generated by the new levy, and the program has generated a reserve fund of approximately \$10 million. In 2008, the agency will engage in a planning process at the program level to coordinate veterans levy spending and county service priorities.

## Chapter IV: Needs Assessment

The consultants interviewed local, state and national veterans' services experts about the needs of Pierce County veterans, availability of services in Pierce County, and nature and capacity of the Pierce County veterans' services system. The following observations resulted from that set of interviews.

### A. Veterans' Services Needs

Data collected by the Pierce County Veterans' Bureau, U. S. Department of Veterans' Affairs, U.S. Census Bureau, and Pierce County social services agencies indicate that Pierce County is home to approximately 3,000 indigent veterans. Washington is one of only six states with an increasing veteran population. 13 percent of Washington state residents are veterans, and over 16 percent of Pierce County residents are veterans.

Washington has one of the most rapidly aging populations in the country. Between 2005 and 2020, the number of elderly Washingtonians will increase 73 percent. As life expectancy increases, the costs to local governments associated with caring for aging indigent veterans will also increase.

#### ***General Needs***

A survey of Pierce County veterans' service providers conducted as part of this study found that both Pierce County's homeless and housed indigent veterans frequently experience the following types of needs:

1. Employment referrals to employers who can work with high needs employees, employment training and education
2. Mental health and substance abuse treatment
3. Medical and dental care
4. Outreach
5. Case management
6. Discharge upgrade assistance and eligibility assistance
7. Transportation

### ***Housing Needs***

One of the greatest struggles faced by indigent veterans is obtaining stable, affordable housing. Veterans are over represented in our nation's chronically homeless population. Although they represent 11 percent of America's overall adult population<sup>3</sup>, veterans comprise approximately 25 percent of America's homeless population and 33 percent of homeless men<sup>4</sup>. As the number of combat veterans increases due to American involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan, it is likely that the number of homeless veterans will rise commensurately.

Indigent veterans, like all low-income Pierce County residents, struggle to become or remain housed in a market with little access to affordable housing. According to staff at the Pierce County Community Services' Housing Programs, there is a demand for 30,000 additional units of affordable housing<sup>5</sup>. New affordable housing units are being developed at a rate of 20 units per year, while demand for affordable units is growing much faster.

The *Pierce County Point in Time Homeless Count* found an increase in the number of homeless veterans from 235 in 2005 to 293 in 2007. The annual U. S. Veterans' Administration Community Homelessness Assessment, Local Education and Networking Group survey (VA CHALENG Survey), which includes veterans receiving services through VA facilities in both Tacoma and Seattle, found an estimated 2,760 homeless veterans in the Puget Sound area, 987 of who are chronically homeless. Data from the VA CHALENG Survey are considered reliable, as the survey is conducted over a period of time, collects information on veterans based on their discharge status, and contacts both clients and providers.

The 2007 Pierce County fall Stand Down event attracted 134 indigent veterans, the largest number in over two years. Pierce County's first Homeless Connect event, in the fall of 2007, attracted 90 veterans who identified themselves as homeless, indigent, or in need of health, medical, or employment services.

Based on these numbers, the study team estimates that approximately 900 of Pierce County's estimated 3,000 indigent veterans are homeless, including approximately 300 high-needs chronically homeless veterans. High-needs chronically homeless individuals are those with long-term health problems, mental illnesses, and/or addictions and prolonged or multiple incidences of homelessness.

Housing is consistently listed as the top need in Washington State's VA CHALENG Survey. Some veterans require nightly shelter; others need

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<sup>3</sup> National Coalition of Homeless Veterans, 2005

<sup>4</sup> Homelessness Research Institute, 2007

<sup>5</sup> 80% of median income is roughly equivalent to 150% of federal Poverty Guidelines, the definition of indigence used in the Pierce County Veterans' Program.

transitional housing, permanent housing, or occasional emergency assistance to prevent homelessness.

Homeless veterans tend to have greater needs than the general homeless population. They have more health problems, including AIDS, cancer, and hypertension; are more likely to have been homeless for more than one year; and suffer from mental illness and substance abuse at higher rates than non-veterans<sup>6</sup>. Approximately 45 percent of homeless veterans suffer from mental illness and over 70 percent suffer from alcohol or substance abuse problems, with many dually diagnosed<sup>7</sup>.

National data indicate high needs among homeless veterans nationwide. The VA Health System's *Veterans' Integrated Service Network 20* study (*VISN 20*), however, found that homeless veterans in the Northwest Region (Alaska, Idaho, Oregon and Washington) have the highest incidence of hospitalization for mental health reasons in the nation (nearly 50 percent compared with the VA's national average of 28 percent). Northwest region homeless veterans also experience nearly double the national average rate of substance abuse admissions<sup>8</sup>.

High-needs chronically homeless people cycle through county jails, hospitals, mental health facilities and detoxification centers. Eventually they are returned to the street where they continue generating enormous costs for public agencies. High-needs chronically homeless individuals comprise about ten percent of the overall homeless population, but they consume fifty percent of resources dedicated to serving homeless people<sup>9</sup>.

Historically, subsidized housing providers have required that applicants for assistance maintain sobriety and have no criminal record in order to obtain housing. These requirements create significant barriers to housing for high needs chronically homeless people. A growing body of research<sup>10</sup> demonstrates that access to supportive housing, which includes services to address chronic health, chemical dependency and mental health problems, is critical to successful stabilization and long-term housing of high needs chronically homeless people, and can improve their social and economic functioning.

Supportive housing leads to increased efficiency and substantial savings across multiple services systems.<sup>11</sup> Providing supportive housing for high needs chronically homeless people reduces the costs of crisis services from law

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<sup>6</sup> VA Medical Center, Northeast Program Evaluation Center, 1994; University of Massachusetts 2002.

<sup>7</sup> VA Research Institute and U.S. Census Bureau.

<sup>8</sup> *VISN 20*.

<sup>9</sup> Dennis Culhane, "New Strategies and Collaborations Target Homelessness," Fannie Mae Foundation, Vol 4, No 5, June 2002

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

enforcement, courts, jails and hospitals. It also reduces the impact these individuals have on neighborhoods.

Savings in emergency services such as shelters, jails and emergency rooms often more than offset the cost of permanent supportive housing. Permanent supportive housing in Seattle has been found in preliminary studies to dramatically reduce hospital sobering and jail visits<sup>12</sup>. According to the Urban Institute, permanent supportive housing has reduced chronic homelessness in Denver by 36 percent in the two years that units have been available, 70 percent in Portland, OR in two years, and 45 percent in Quincy, MA in three years<sup>13</sup>. This demonstrated successful approach stabilizes lives while reducing public costs.

## **B. Existing System Capacity**

Services exist for Pierce County's indigent veterans in the following areas:

1. Relief services for indigent veterans with housing
2. Medical, mental health, chemical dependency treatment services for veterans with adequate discharge status and the ability to navigate complex service systems
3. Limited case management, discharge upgrade and eligibility assistance
4. Individual cash benefits for veterans with adequate discharge status

Resources for providing affordable housing and ending homelessness exist. These are not adequate to meet the enormous need, but unaccessed state and federal housing resources are available.

During the past decade, federal housing funders encouraged counties to develop coordinated strategies, which address homelessness through Ten Year Plans to End Homelessness and the McKinney Act's Continuum of Care planning requirements. Additional studies identified the complex needs and issues that make many returning soldiers vulnerable to indigence and homelessness. In response, national policymakers have focused renewed attention on veterans' needs, and federal and state agencies have begun expanding resources and services for veterans.

Federal leadership, funding and technical assistance have been instrumental in marshalling and coordinating resources at all levels of government toward ending

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<sup>12</sup> *Seattle Post Intelligencer*, January 9, 2008.

[http://www.seattlepi.nwsourc.com/local/346602\\_wethousing09.html](http://www.seattlepi.nwsourc.com/local/346602_wethousing09.html)

<sup>13</sup> Urban Institute, October 2007.

homelessness. Federal actions on homelessness have created momentum for changes in state and local housing strategies and practices. These actions include:

- Initiating the national movement toward ending homelessness in ten years through development of state and county ten year plans
- Funding homeless assistance (McKinney Act funds) at the county level, and requiring development of county continuum of care plans to address homelessness
- U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development funding for nonprofits to provide transitional and permanent supportive housing for high-needs chronically homeless individuals and families
- VA Grants and Per Diem program funds to local affordable housing developers to build or rehabilitate transitional housing facilities for veterans and to nonprofit service providers to provide supportive services to residents of VA-funded transitional housing facilities

The State of Washington has also engaged in significant efforts to address homelessness, including:

- Requiring counties to develop ten year plans to end homelessness
- Creating flexible housing funding streams through enactment of two new document recording fees (2060 and 2163 funds), a portion of which are retained by local governments
- Creating the Washington State Housing Trust Fund, and
- Creating tax credits for developers of affordable housing.

## **C. Gaps in Resources, Services, and Coordination**

### *Resources*

1. The Pierce County Veterans Bureau lacks adequate resources to meet demand for relief vouchers.
2. The Pierce County Veterans Bureau lacks meaningful resources to address the needs of homeless veterans.
3. Community-based veterans' service providers have expertise and access to hardest-to-serve indigent veterans but lack funds to take advantage of their positioning.

### *Services*

4. There is a huge unmet demand for affordable housing.
5. There is a significant gap between relief recipients and the services relief vouchers provide them.
6. There is a significant gap between the need for permanent and transitional supportive housing and the availability of such facilities.

### *Coordination*

7. The Pierce County Veterans Bureau lacks the staff and capacity to meaningfully coordinate with the County's housing planning initiatives (e.g. the Ten Year Plan to End Homelessness and the McKinney Act Continuum of Care plan).
8. The Pierce County Veterans Bureau lacks the staff and capacity to envision, plan for and create a countywide system of veterans' services.

## Chapter V: Conclusions and Recommendations

### A. Veterans' Services System Planning

Services for low-income Pierce County residents do not prioritize veterans or maximize existing services and funding by serving veterans.

There is no formal coordination or countywide veterans' services system planning between the Pierce County Veterans' Bureau and other veterans' services providers in Pierce County.

The Pierce County Veterans' Bureau is a logical place for such a planning and coordination function to be housed.

The Pierce County Veterans' Bureau lacks the staff and capacity to meaningfully coordinate between veterans' services and housing planning. There are two significant planning processes to coordinate services and resources for homeless people in Pierce County: the Continuum of Care plan under the McKinney Act and the Ten Year Plan to End Homelessness. Currently the Pierce County Veterans' Bureau has no sustained or meaningful participation in either of these processes. As a result, veteran-specific housing needs are not a primary focus of either of these planning processes.

**Recommendation 1:** Hire an experienced planner for the Veterans' Bureau to coordinate with housing and social service providers in Pierce County. This position should have two primary functions:

- Create and adopt a countywide vision for a veterans' services system and develop and implement a plan for that system with the goal of lifting veterans and their families out of indigence by addressing the conditions that contribute to indigence. Joint planning should focus on creating a system of veterans' services that monitors needs, gaps and demand for services and adjusts contracted funding to respond to them.
- Increase the visibility of and priority on veterans needs in countywide housing planning efforts.

As part of this planning process, the planner should:

- a. Involve local, state and federal funders and service providers serving Pierce County veterans
- b. Develop, with other veterans' stakeholders, a vision for a countywide veterans' services system

- c. Develop, with other veterans' stakeholders, a plan to create such a system
- d. Work to see the plan is implemented
- e. Prioritize Pierce County Veterans' Bureau funding toward plan implementation
- f. Identify ways to strategically utilize veteran-specific funding streams, for example attaching flexible Veterans' Bureau funds to veterans and funding discharge upgrades, to give veterans higher priority for services from other organizations.
- g. Act as liaison in regional housing planning processes to increase awareness of veterans' needs and to increase coordination and targeting of housing services to veterans

**Estimated cost:** \$76,000 / year

## **B. Veterans' General Needs**

The Pierce County Veterans' Bureau lacks adequate resources to meet demand for relief vouchers.

There is a significant gap between the needs of indigent veterans who receive relief vouchers and the services relief vouchers provide them. While relief vouchers can be an important component of a county's homelessness prevention strategy, providing relief without addressing the underlying causes of veterans' financial instability will not increase the long-term stability of those served or lift them out of indigence. Many relief recipients will benefit more from access to professional services than from expansion of the voucher system. Such stabilizing and poverty-fighting assistance will reduce demand for relief vouchers.

The Bureau lacks resources to address the needs of homeless veterans, the highest need subgroup in the indigent veterans population.

The Bureau lacks resources to address the non-emergency needs of all indigent veterans.

Federal and state funds in the form of individual veterans' benefits are underutilized, and Pierce County incurs costs in criminal justice and emergency shelter and health services as a result. Many veterans are unable to access benefits and services for which they are eligible. Some are unable to navigate public systems effectively without outside advocacy. Others distrust military and government services and need encouragement to apply. Some would be eligible

if their discharge status could be upgraded, and some lack the priority status to receive services despite being technically eligible.

Community-based veterans' services providers have expertise in effectively addressing these non-housing needs and have access to Pierce County's hardest-to-serve indigent veterans, but lack adequate funds to maximize their positioning.

**Recommendation 2:** Increase Pierce County Veterans' Bureau funding to allow contracting for services with community-based veterans' services providers.

Contracted services should initially include:

- a. Outreach
- b. Case management
- c. Discharge upgrades
- d. Eligibility assistance
- e. Transportation assistance and
- f. Employment assistance.

Case managers should focus on maximizing veterans' federal and state benefits.

Funding for two case managers, one employment assistance provider, one outreach position, and one provider working on eligibility and discharge assistance, along with some transportation funding, will address this gap.

Some of the organizations well positioned to reach underserved veterans include Community Mental Health's PATH program, the Metropolitan Development Council of Tacoma/Pierce County's Health Care for the Homeless program, and South Sound Outreach.

**Estimated cost:** \$225,000 / year

### **C. Veterans' Housing Needs**

The needs of Pierce County's highest needs indigent veterans cannot be effectively addressed outside the context of the County's system of homeless planning and service delivery. Pierce County's homeless population includes a large and growing percentage of individuals who are veterans.

There is a need to develop a variety of housing options throughout Pierce County, including emergency housing to provide shelter for veterans who are waiting to access inpatient treatment services, transitional and permanent supportive housing and housing subsidies.

There is an enormous gap between the demand for affordable housing for people under 80 percent of median income and the availability of such housing. Low-income housing developers struggle to compete for developable land with private developers of more expensive housing.

There is a significant gap between the need for permanent and transitional supportive housing and the availability of such facilities. There is a substantial number of indigent veterans in Pierce County who are high needs chronically homeless. These individuals cannot be effectively housed through conventional approaches. They require supportive housing that provides for resident managers, on-site support services and controlled building access.

Pierce County is not accessing all available state and federal housing funds, including Washington State Housing Trust Fund resources and U. S. Veterans' Administration grants and per diem funding.

A coordinated positive statement confirming Pierce County government's willingness to support strategies for ending homelessness is required to open the door for state Housing Trust Fund dollars.

Pierce County should have a priority status to receive VA Grant and Per Diem funds for veterans' transitional housing due to the County's large number of veterans and lack of prior accessing of these funds. An eligible and willing applicant organization must be identified in order to apply for funds. Currently, Pierce County nonprofit housing developers have declined to apply because of its focus on transitional housing and the demands of other housing developments

**Recommendation 3:** The County should provide incentives and assistance to encourage low-income housing development, including:

- a. Tax credits or abatements to developers engaged in low-income or homeless housing development
- b. A land trust to enable low-income and homeless housing developers to purchase land for housing developments, using 2160 or 2063 funds or other mechanism to hold available land for nonprofit developers while those developers raise funds for low-income housing projects
- c. Incentives to land sellers for selling to low-income or homeless housing developers

- d. Continue to support the Tacoma Encampment Reduction / Housing First pilot project and consider expanding the housing first component to areas outside the City of Tacoma

**Recommendation 4:** The County should spearhead creation of a permanent supportive housing development for high needs chronically homeless people. To access Washington State Housing Trust Fund dollars, the Pierce County Council should make a positive statement of policy about spending Community Development Block Grant and HOME dollars to support the project.

**Recommendation 5:** The County's Community Services Department should pursue and engage a low-income housing developer to apply for VA Grant and Per Diem funds, perhaps offering Pierce County Veterans' Bureau dollars to meet the gap between VA funds and operating costs. If Pierce County-based low-income housing developers continue to decline to participate, reach-out to King County based low-income housing development organizations such as LIHI, the Compass Center and Pioneer Human Services. This transitional housing should link the highest needs veterans with the permanent supportive housing development.

## **D. Timetable**

The recommendations above will require significant new resources for Pierce County Veterans' Bureau staff and contracts and for homeless housing. The investments made should reduce demand on the Veterans' Assistance Fund and create savings in emergency services such as shelters, the criminal justice system, and emergency health services.

**Recommendation 6:** Create a phased strategy of resource realignment, perhaps as follows:

**Year One:** Hire Pierce County Veterans' Bureau planning staff, initiate involvement with key housing initiatives; begin planning with community-based veterans' services providers; fund initial, small contracts for services; develop a plan to build a system to maximize federal and state benefits for individual veterans and increase service systems' priority on serving veterans.

**Year Two:** Continue expanding contract funding for veterans' services and implementing systems plans.

### **Year Three:**

- Reduce Pierce County Veterans' Bureau relief funds and increase Bureau contract funds.
- Examine whether shelter and emergency services costs are significantly reduced as a result of transitional and permanent supportive housing and shift funding to supportive housing.
- Explore sustainable funding methods such as a voter-approved levy, if necessary, to replace General Fund support for new veterans' initiatives.
- Establish an Ad Hoc Committee should be convened to examine the feasibility of bringing such a measure to Pierce County voters.
- Ensure there is a sound services system and detailed expenditure plan in place prior to proposing a levy to voters; King County's experience of passing a levy and collecting substantial funds has emphasized the importance collaborative planning that unites all key stakeholders around program level funding decision and supports collaborative partnerships essential for success.