Minnesota's Homeless Veterans Registry: Technology to Prevent and End Homelessness

State of Minnesota — Minnesota IT Services

CATEGORY:
Digital Services: Government to Business

CONTACT:
Emily Shimkus
Director of Communications
emily.shimkus@state.mn.us
(O) 651-201-1011
(C) 651-485-1354

INITIATION DATE:
October 2018

END DATE:
August 2019

MINNESOTA IT SERVICES

Executive Summary

Minnesota IT Services (MNIT) partnered with the Minnesota Department of Veterans Affairs (MDVA) to launch the Homeless Veterans Registry in 2019 to enhance the MDVA's ability to provide care and resources for our state's servicemen and women.

Governor Tim Walz declared November to be Military Family Month in Minnesota, honoring the men and women that have risked their lives in service to the state and country. State government is working to ensure these families have access to the services and resources to which they are entitled.

The state of Minnesota is committed to ending homelessness among its veterans, and an important step toward that goal is understanding the barriers individuals may face in accessing affordable and permanent housing.

In August 2019, MNIT debuted a new application that allows housing and service professionals to more efficiently assess the needs of homeless veterans, prioritizing those that are facing the most barriers, have been experiencing homelessness the longest, or need critical care. Previously, MDVA had a basic registry application that was extremely limited in functionality and interaction, and that lacked reporting capabilities. The enhanced Homeless Veterans Registry is essential to sustaining the success of recent years. This means we'll need to continue to tap the registry as cases arise to prevent increases in homelessness.

Minnesota's statewide Homeless Veterans Registry creates individual housing plans based on each veteran's unique challenges and situation and is largely credited as the key to Minnesota's success. Once in the registry, the goal is to have any veteran experiencing homelessness housed within four months.

The application leverages human-centered design by interviewing end users, assessing their needs, and creating a more powerful application that addresses those challenges and provides essential data. MNIT collected feedback from the social service providers that input the information of veterans experiencing homelessness, the professionals that review the information to understand housing barriers, and the organizations that perform outreach to housing units.

The streamlined nature of the new application allows community partners to self-serve any updates about the veterans, housing availability, and resources available to those experiencing homelessness. The new application also provides MDVA and its community partners better data and reporting on homelessness in Minnesota, helping to identify common barriers to housing that can be addressed.

EXEMPLAR

The state of Minnesota is committed to ending homelessness among its veterans, and an important step toward that goal is identifying veterans with needs, and understanding the barriers individuals may face in accessing affordable and permanent housing.

To help veterans experiencing homelessness access stable housing, MDVA created the Minnesota Homeless Veteran Registry, that also features a public-facing dashboard. The registry connects veterans experiencing homelessness with housing and services in their community. It also helps programs serving veterans to coordinate their efforts. Participation is voluntary for veterans.

This effort is part of the Minnesota Interagency Council on Homelessness, made up of the Commissioners of 11 state agencies, the Chair of the Metropolitan Council, and the Governors office.

MNIT technical teams partnered with MDVA staff to transform what was a basic SharePoint list into a comprehensive application that captures information about veterans' homelessness, and relates it to barriers and landlord incentives to result in shorter wait times to more veterans being housed.

We used existing technology, and added best practices for app development, data strategies, and project management to increase the power of data needed for state government program leaders to make informed decisions. Now, all decisions are data-driven. People are being served and Minnesota is able to clearly identify who is most at-risk, where the gaps are, how much funding is needed, and then allocate funding where it's needed most.

Significant resources have been invested in Minnesota's efforts to end veteran homelessness, and providers are working together to efficiently identify veterans and their needs, but the critical link to housing through landlords and housing developers is what will get us over the finish line. The graphs below illustrates the numbers of veterans identified and house since the inception of the registry.
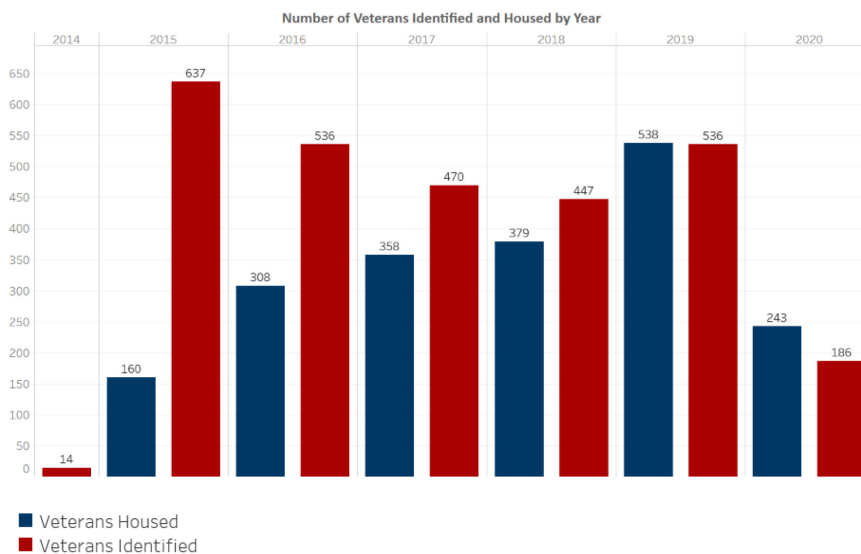

Figure 1: Number of Veterans Identified and Housed by Year

CONCEPT

The existing app was built in 2014 as a basic SharePoint site and was extremely difficult for veteran service organizations to use. Because of the limited functionality, it only allowed us to categorize and track basic data. There was no centralized data source, and that meant reports were inconsistent, unreliable, and not pertinent. Additionally, the application relied heavily on InfoPath forms and workflows that are slated for end of life in the near future. Also, it was unclear how many veterans were experiencing homelessness because the application was so difficult to use and there was no ability to identify or remove duplicate data. With the new application, there is now a true picture of the number of veterans that need services. The application data also reflects the entire path of an individual who may have been homeless, was housed, and became homeless again.
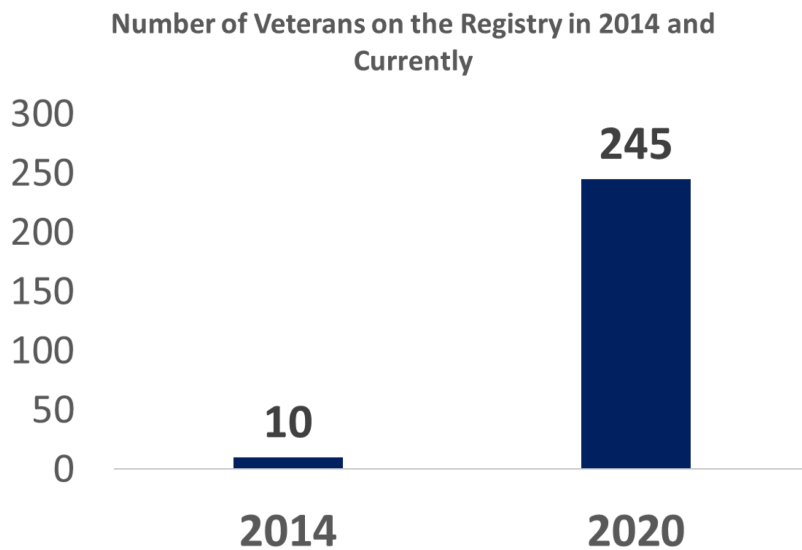
Number of Veterans on the Registry in 2014 and Currently

300	
250	**245**
200	
150	
100	
50	**10**
0	
2014	**2020**

Figure 2: Number of Veterans on the Registry in 2014 and Currently

MNIT and MDVA used the SharePoint Framework (SPFx), a page and web part model that provides full support for client-side SharePoint development and easy integration with SharePoint data. The application supports multiple housing options, and matches up veterans with all possible options.

The public dashboard was released in November 2019 (shown below) and uses Tableau to display the data.
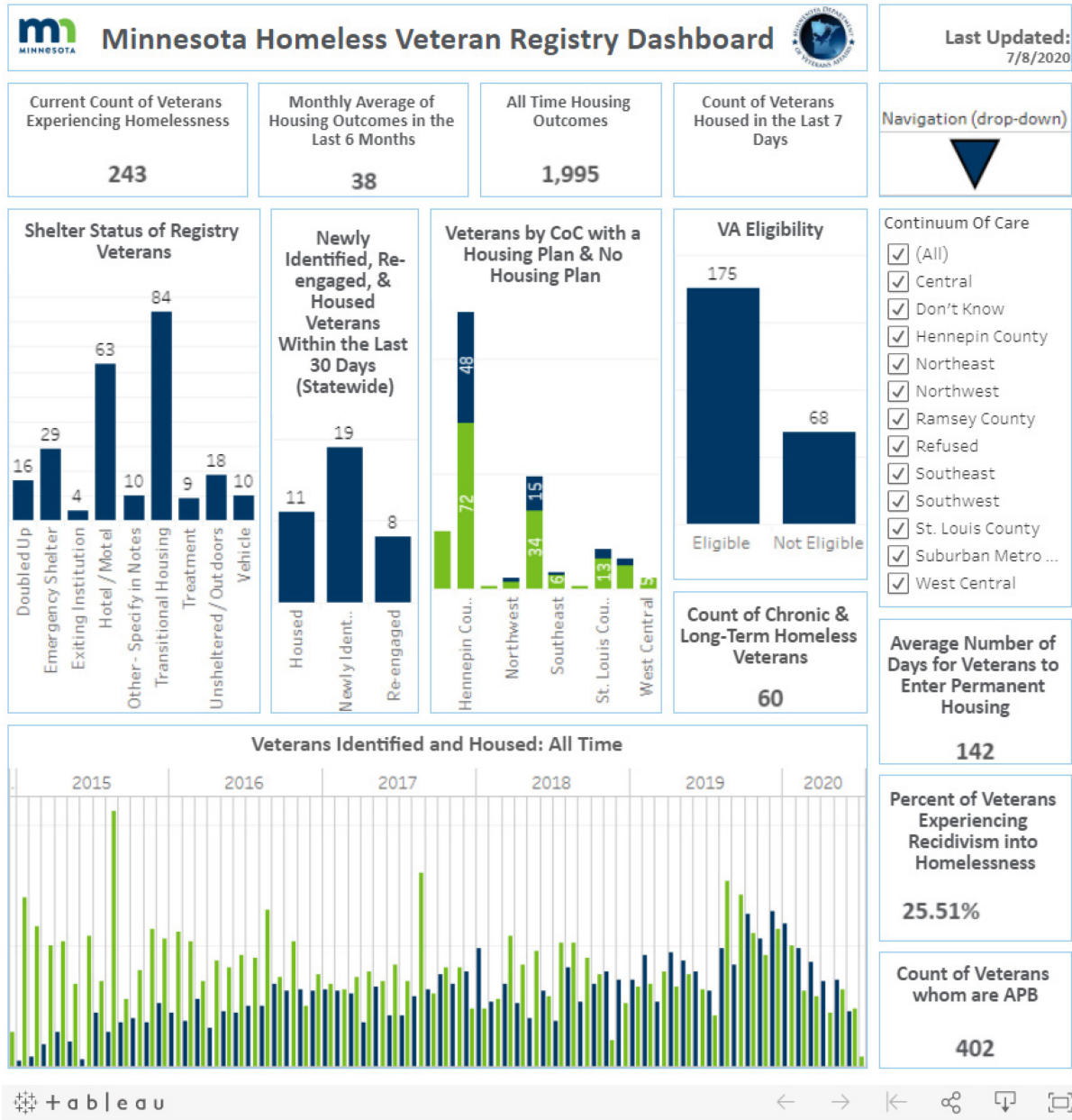
Figure 3: Screenshot of the Minnesota Homeless Veterans Registry Dashboard

The mobile app is in production in 2020 and will be released mid-year. MNIT and MDVA are currently adding programs for funding and bringing more programs in-house.

The project was delivered via an Agile methodology. Using sprints, getting additional functionality for veterans to use was completed in 7-10 days. Data is replicated and anonymized for reporting purposes, and data reports are used to drive progress forward.

This project involved one consultant for six months, one Business Analyst, and the MNIT Application Development team partnering with MDVA.

SIGNIFICANCE

The beneficiaries are Minnesota's veterans. Stakeholders include landlords, social service providers, the federal VA, local public housing authorities, the Governor's office, and the 11 state organizations involved in the state's efforts to end homelessness.

By providing accurate, timely data, this application helps identify and house veterans experiencing homelessness. This directly relates to the success of Minnesota's overall efforts to end homelessness.

This initiative meets the NASCIO's State CIO Top Ten Priorities of Digital Government, Cybersecurity and Risk Management, Legacy Modernization, Data Management and Analytics, Innovation and Transformation through Technology.

It also meets several of [MNIT's Leadership Strategies](#) outlined in the Master Plan.

- Provide technology leadership and education to state agencies to improve processes and enhance decision-making.
- Create enterprise strategies around solutions and elevate business problems that share common technology solutions.
- Partner with agencies to use technology to connect with Minnesotans and provide better online government services.
- Implement data management strategies that help agencies to manage data as a strategic information asset.
- Harness the power of the State of Minnesota enterprise to reduce the time it takes to deliver solutions, leverage the economy of scale, and build on our shared experience.

IMPACT

Before, Minnesota essentially had a list of individual names of veterans experiencing homelessness, and not a lot of helpful information. As a result of this application, Minnesota has new insights to help guide us:

- Now, the number of veterans is clear and episodes of homelessness are accurately tracked. With a holistic picture of veterans experiencing homelessness, Minnesota's data reliability and integrity increased.
- Minnesota can identify which veterans are the most vulnerable and what their needs are.
- The new data gathered revealed gaps in the system and barriers that prevented veterans from getting housing.
- Trends are highlighted, so Minnesota can make a difference in trend lines.
- User interaction increased significantly among partner agencies.
- Landlords are finding real data to help them make decisions.
- Once a barrier is identified, Minnesota can provide solutions to removing them.
- Security for individual data has been increased.