



NEWS

MONTGOMERY COUNTY OFFICE OF COMMUNICATIONS
COURT HOUSE, NORRISTOWN, PA., BOX 311, 19404-0311

Frank X. Custer, Communications Director

Jessica Willingham, Communications Assistant

PHONE (610) 278-3061 FAX (610) 278-5943

COMMISSIONERS: JOSH SHAPIRO, *Chair*

VALERIE A. ARKOOSH, MD, MPH, *Vice Chair*

BRUCE L. CASTOR, JR., *Commissioner*



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Montco Commissioners Sign Challenge To Eliminate Veteran Homelessness In 2015

Norristown, PA (September 22, 2015) – The Montgomery County Commissioners today came together with federal, state, and local housing and veterans officials in Norristown and signed the “Mayors Challenge to End Veteran Homelessness.” The Mayors Challenge is part of the Obama Administration’s program known as “Opening Doors: Federal Strategic Plan to Prevent and End Homelessness.”

“Today is not a beginning,” said Josh Shapiro, chair of the county commissioners. “It is the beginning of the end to veteran homelessness in Montgomery County. We can eliminate veteran homelessness in Montgomery County by the end of the year.”

Commissioner Val Arkoosh agreed pointing out that the Montgomery County Veterans Affairs office together with the Montgomery County Housing Authority, the Montgomery County Housing and Community Development Department, and several state and federal agencies and non-profits have been working hard for two years to eliminate veteran homelessness.

“The fact that individuals and families in this country are homeless is hard to comprehend,” Arkoosh said, “but the idea that veterans, who fought for this country and put their lives on the line, are homeless is abhorrent.”

Sean Halbom, director of the Montgomery County Veterans Affairs office, said that in February 2014 it was estimated that there would be seven or eight new homeless vets each month. When you add dependents into that number, plus the homeless vets that already existed at that time, it was estimated that there would be about 100 homeless vets and dependents that needed to be placed in permanent housing in 2014 alone.

“The first month, our goal was to place 15 homeless persons in permanent housing,” Halbom said. “We were able to place 30. The systems began to work, and the governmental silos were coming down.”

One of the hallmarks of the current county administration has been the elimination of these silos and the creation of a new culture of cooperation and coordination between county departments and between levels of government.

On April 22, 2015, the Veterans Affairs office began another concentrated 100-Day program, and since then the county team working together has placed 11 literally homeless veterans in permanent housing, and has prevented 17 veterans and 32 dependents from becoming homeless. Today, there are four literally homeless veterans in the county, but there is a varying number (currently less than 10) of Montgomery County veterans, who were previously literally homeless, in transitional status at the Veterans Center in Coatesville.

“The important thing to understand here is that these numbers are just a snapshot in time,” said Commissioner Bruce L. Castor, Jr. “The work is never done. We can eliminate veteran homelessness by the end of the year, and yet have several homeless vets by the end of January. We will stay vigilant.”

The program today included two previously homeless veterans. Charmaine Ijeoma, the homeless outreach staff in the county Veterans Affairs office, talked about her time being homeless and how it is now her daily goal to find permanent housing for people who were in her position. Peter Rushing, a Naval veteran, also related how the county system had assisted him in finding permanent housing.

Other speakers included Lt. Col. (Ret.) Maura “Mo” Gillen, deputy executive director of the Veterans Multi-service Center in Coatesville; Joel Johnson, executive director of the Montgomery County Housing Authority; Carolyn Mayinja, head of the Montgomery County Housing and Community Development department; and Jane C.W. Vincent, regional administrator, U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, Region III.