

Case Study: Functional Zero Announcement

Results and Learning from Lynchburg Virginia

Objective. In August 2020, Lynchburg, Virginia announced that it had reached functional zero for veteran homelessness. The community wanted to use the opportunity to advance key community goals, while preventing some of the negative outcomes from a previous announcement around achieving the USICH Benchmarks and Criteria. Community Solutions worked with the community to design the communications roll out strategy and execute it.

This case study shares learnings, recommendations, and results of those efforts.

Background

The Lynchburg Area, served by the Central Virginia Continuum of Care, covers one city, four counties, and a population of 261,214. The state of Virginia was certified for reaching USICH's benchmarks and criteria for ending veteran homelessness in 2015. In February of 2020, the community reached functional zero for veteran homelessness.

The community wanted to announce its achievement to advance five key goals:

1. A story of shared ownership and acknowledgment of the efforts to reach this goal;
2. Credible, accurate, and clear articulation and understanding of the achievement from key audiences;
3. Positive reception of the achievement, as reflected in coverage;
4. Local will and understanding of additional supports needed to **sustain**; and
5. Local will and momentum generated toward efforts to **end chronic homelessness**.

"It takes community will to sustain an end to homelessness," Sarah Quarantotto, Executive Director of Miriam's House, said. "Without sharing the story, it's a missed opportunity to

engage a broader audience. And there could be so many benefits of that. Components of the system rely on community will. That's the big reason that we say yes to communications. We know that if you just stay silent or behind the curtain working, it doesn't give the community an opportunity to engage with the work and then to support the work."

The community's biggest concern was inciting the pushback and disbelief that resulted from the announcement for reaching USICH's benchmarks and criteria in 2015.

A widespread lack of understanding resulted in people not believing the community had ended veteran homelessness ("I can see people on my street").

For these reasons, the community had two additional process goals:

6. Ensure coordinated and aligned messaging across all partners and messengers;
7. Highlight USICH 2015 designation without undermining credibility of the announcement

Results

The team was able to achieve a credible, clear, and accurate articulation of the achievement, thanks to disciplined and coordinated messaging efforts.

The team recalled the pushback from the state announcement. "That was our biggest fear," said Quarantotto. "But that didn't happen, since the messaging was so clear."

The team noted the critical role played by coordinated and aligned messaging across all partners and messengers. The team leveraged various products that were tailored for platforms, including talking points, a [social media toolkit](#), and [graphics](#).

The speakers incorporated the talking points into their conference remarks, resulting in consistent reinforcement throughout the event. Key messages included that reaching functional zero did not mean that no veteran would ever experience homelessness or a housing emergency again. Nearly every speaker reinforced that the milestone demonstrated what was possible, and also what must be protected.

"People used the fact sheets that were distributed," said Sarah Fuentes, Homeless System Coordinator at Miriam's House. "It was also cool to see member organizations share the graphics and messaging on their own social media."

She noted that the high-quality [press release](#) exceeded expectations for typical local press releases, so “everyone just followed suit.”

All but one article correctly described the achievement, and all referenced functional zero in their headlines. These articles sidestepped the skepticism that was previously aroused by headlines focusing solely on the framing that the community had ended veteran homelessness.

The community achieved a very positive community-wide reception of the achievement.

“Positive press for homelessness is necessary for any community, big or small, because there’s so much negative press,” Quarantotto said.

She noted that every news station covered it, and the major newspaper covered it. The team was flooded by phone calls and emails and positive comments on social media. The announcement elicited a significant amount of positive feedback, and the team could not identify any negative backlash.

“The materials were good, the press coverage was fantastic, and it added a lot of validity to the work,” she said. “People were proud of it, and had a better understanding of what it meant.”

The community has not yet received offers of additional support needed to sustain progress on veterans or drive to functional zero on chronic homelessness. But they do believe that the validity of the announcement supports ongoing will, as part of a longer-term strategy.

As of September 2020, the team had not seen action from partners to sustain progress on functional zero for veterans. “For relationship building and political will, this is one stop on a more long-term goal,” she said.

All but two of the city council members attended the event and were engaged throughout the process. The team also invited key state partners, who attended or participated in the [press conference](#).

"It is always really important for us to engage the state in the work, and for them to know that we're doing great things, particularly since they make decisions to direct or not direct funds to different communities."

"It's a moment to build upon. When we go back for a different conversation about affordable housing, it adds a layer of recognition for the CoC and Miriam's House."

Recommendations for Other Communities

- **Recognize the announcement's value in generating community will.** "We would definitely do it again," said Quarantotto. "Ending homelessness is so often behind the scenes — but visibility and awareness is everything to generate community will."
- **Recognize the announcement's value in morale.** "For those who have been doing the work, it was a morale booster to be able to be celebrated. It was a sweet reunion and celebration of this big thing we've been working on, week in and week out for two years. That was special."
- **Start planning early.** "Our suggestion to communities is to start planning early so you can figure out messages, who the right speakers are, and what the story is."
- **Seize the opportunity.** "We know that if you just stay silent or behind the curtain working, it doesn't give the community an opportunity to engage with the work and then to support the work."

RESOURCES

- [Press Release](#)
- [Press Conference Run of Show](#)
- [Press Conference](#)
- [Social Toolkit](#)
- [Graphics](#)
- [Blog Post | Case Study](#)