

Leveraging the Habitat for Humanity Model to Serve Veterans

By Red Philanthropy

In 2020, a partnership began that would have significant impact on veterans living in the Phoenix Metro area. Maricopa County had been experiencing significantly rising housing costs, displacing hardworking households in record numbers. The Habitat for Humanity Central Arizona (HFH CAZ) affiliate and an entrepreneurial philanthropist team saw an opportunity to respond to the growing need. As a result, HFH CAZ and the Milanovich Trust launched a multi-year initiative to customize its existing services to serve vulnerable veterans in Maricopa County. The results have been beyond expectations.

United States veteran homelessness

According to the U.S. Census, veterans consist of seven percent of the population, totaling approximately 18 million individuals. The average age is 65 years old with Vietnam veterans representing the largest percentage of service experience.¹

As of 2023, nearly 40,000 veterans experience homelessness on any given night.² This number is down approximately 43 percent since 2011.³ However, according to the CDC, veterans are overrepresented among the homeless in the United States and are at greater risk than non-veterans of becoming homeless. Sadly, another 1.4 million veterans are estimated to be on the brink of homelessness.⁴ Among the reasons, housing shortage is listed as one of the top three, along with mental health and substance abuse, the latter of which are often correlated with military service. This community has served our country, yet despite the many social services offered, continues to struggle to achieve the housing security they have earned.

Case study – Habitat for Humanity Central Arizona (HFH CAZ)

Fred and Linda Milanovich created the Milanovich Trust to do God’s will through their charitable giving. Through the Trust’s generosity, Air Force Academy graduates and close friends Fred and John Fuller are collaborating to help support vulnerable veterans in a variety of ways.

In Phoenix, residents are experiencing the third highest rise in inflation within the U.S. after Philadelphia and Tampa.⁵ This is absolutely affecting the ability of the average American to secure safe and affordable housing. In 2019, the Trust team approached Air Force veteran and HFH CAZ Chief Executive Officer, Jason Barlow, to brainstorm ways they could customize the proven practices at Habitat to target veterans in Maricopa County. “In my very first meeting with Fred and Linda they wanted to know how many veterans we could serve here in the valley,” Barlow said. “Frankly, until meeting them I hadn’t really

¹ [Those Who Served: America's Veterans From World War II to the War on Terror \(census.gov\)](https://www.census.gov/data/tables/2019/other-reports/2019-08-01/veterans.html)

² [Homeless Veterans Statistics 2021 | Policy Advice | Policy Advice](https://www.pewresearch.org/2021/04/08/homeless-veterans/)

³ [Homeless Veterans Statistics 2021 | Policy Advice | Policy Advice](https://www.pewresearch.org/2021/04/08/homeless-veterans/)

⁴ [Preventing Chronic Disease | Prevalence and Risk of Homelessness Among US Veterans - CDC](https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/mmwr-reports/prevalence-and-risk-of-homelessness-among-us-veterans.html)

⁵ [Cities Where Inflation is Rising the Most \(wallethub.com\)](https://www.wallethub.com/insights/cities-where-inflation-is-rising-the-most/)

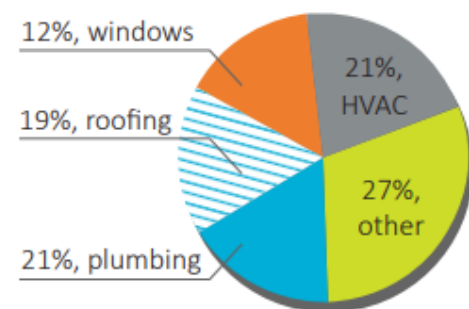
thought about it—but found the whole notion very exciting.” With the help of many team members, the following three pilot projects were launched.

Pilot Project #1: Home repairs

Most people know of the successful Habitat for Humanity (HFH) model where volunteers help build homes in partnership with the future homeowner to create opportunities for home ownership for the working-class poor. Many HFH affiliates use this expertise and volunteer base to provide home repairs for the aging population, often referred to as “Aging-in-Place.” HFH CAZ and the Milanovich Trust aimed to customize this program to serve veterans of all ages.

Initially, the program required significant promotion to various veteran organizations and communities. However, within 18 months, the waiting list was up to 100 veterans seeking renovation support. Renovations vary in form but ultimately improve much-needed living conditions for veteran households. The chart to the right shares how these renovations have been delivered since inception.

Home Repairs



Additionally, the pilot was malleable to outlier opportunities on a case-by-case basis. In one instance, a veteran whose home had completely burned down found that his insurance only covered the framing. When Fred and Linda heard about this, they agreed to fund the complete rebuilding of this man’s home. In another instance, support was offered to a damaged building serving as a meeting hall for veterans. As of now, our team is unaware of programs like this one offered by the VA.

In total, the program has served more than 150 veteran households. The average funds contributed per household is approximately \$20,000. Since seed funding this program, other donors have come on board to join the effort totaling more than \$400,000 from new funders. This support is creating a growing supply of resources in response to the growing waitlist. The Milanovich Trust founder said, “Our motivation for this work was greatly enhanced once we began visiting the homes of the award recipients and experiencing the challenges they face first-hand.”

Pilot Project #2: Construction-in-Training

Inarguably, HFH is a global leader in efficiently training a volunteer with no construction experience on how to build a safe and affordable home. It can be challenging for active duty to transition into the civilian workforce. This presented HFH CAZ with an opportunity to leverage its hallmark program to train veterans in the construction field. This workforce development program consists of a 16-week, hands-on training experience that includes a weekly stipend to help the veteran pay bills while learning the construction trade. Graduated members leave with a professional certificate, construction site experience and connections to find work in Maricopa County.

From March 2020 to December 2022, 11 veterans graduated from this program and went on to secure employment. HFH CAZ partners with other nonprofits serving veterans to promote this program and add to existing workforce development opportunities, including U.S. Vets, Veterans Chamber of Commerce, UMOM's Day Centers, Desert Dawgs, Veteran-women organization, New Leaf Second Chance, and the Salvation Army, among others.

Pilot project #3: Ashley's Place

According to the U.S. Census, women represent a growing percentage of veterans, totaling nine percent with a projection of 17 percent by 2040.⁶ Additionally, according to a study in the Journal of Clinical Psychiatry titled "Military sexual trauma in US veterans: results from the National Health and Resilience in Veterans Study," one in three, 32.4 percent, of US female veterans screen positive for military sexual trauma (MST). This is approximately half a million veterans.⁷

U.S. Vets approached the Milanovich Trust with a proposal. The working theory is that homeless female veterans will be better able to heal from their MST experience if they are provided female-only housing to receive rehabilitative social services. However, single-gender housing for veterans is rare and limited in the U.S. And, those that do exist are typically connected to an existing compound with mixed-gender housing. The pilot project goal is to determine whether 1) a female-only environment is substantially more beneficial and 2) a home apart from a compound can be operated successfully without the constant surveillance provided at a multi-gender compound.

The Milanovich Trust sought collaboration with HFH CAZ. HFH CAZ had the land to donate and was willing to build these homes and grant them to U.S. Vets to operate for homeless female veterans experiencing trauma. In 2020, the Trust team agreed to contribute \$650,000 to fund two stand-alone homes consisting of ten bedrooms on the HFH CAZ land. The veteran community came together in a mighty way using Habitat's unique volunteer model. The volunteer turnout mostly consisted of veterans, veteran supporters or veteran-friendly businesses. In November 2022, two beautiful homes were opened to serve homeless, female veterans under the management of U.S. Vets. Currently, outcomes of this pilot have yet to be determined. However, the collaborative model of all three parties served as a positive example of a potentially scalable model for other communities. HFH CAZ brought land and volunteer mobilization, US Vets brings expertise serving veterans and the Milanovich Trust brought resources and commitment to evaluate the potential for scale across the philanthropic landscape.

Lessons learned so far

With any pilot project, a proven history of success did not explicitly exist. As a result, opportunities to learn, adapt and improve have been a constant part of these investments. All parties meet regularly throughout the development of each of these programs to ask critical questions, monitor progress, adjust approaches when needed, and celebrate successes along the way. The following summarizes some of these key lessons with each project.

⁶ [Those Who Served: America's Veterans From World War II to the War on Terror \(census.gov\)](https://www.census.gov/data/tables/2019/total/2019-01-01-veterans.html)

⁷ [Top 10 Questions About Military Sexual Trauma \(MST\) \(vaclaimsinsider.com\)](https://www.vaclaimsinsider.com/top-10-questions-about-military-sexual-trauma-mst/)

For the home repairs, we learned that it is critical to inspire other donors to support this program to give the Milanovich Trust an exit strategy while ensuring the program can sustain. In doing so, positioning the gift as a match earlier on could have helped elevate the work sooner among a larger donor pool.

Additionally, our teams realize that serving veterans is not a specific area of expertise for HFH. However, it is important to understand the benefits that each veteran has earned with the VA and ensure those benefits have been exhausted prior to selecting awardees. While this can be done by adding staff with this knowledge, that could be financially limiting. Other ideas include creating a close partnership with the VA or other nonprofits that manage these topics regularly, and/or having an advisory council that has this background and helps point the veteran in the right direction prior to making a home repair awardee recommendation to HFH.

For the Construction-in-Training program, the team was initially having difficulty enrolling a high volume of veterans. This was, in part, due to the timing of the program launch being March 2020 and the following effects of the pandemic. However, HFH CAZ also discovered that creating specific starts and graduation dates for classes of veterans limited the participants' ability to join due to immediate needs, inability to wait for the new cohort and conflicting schedules. HFH CAZ shifted to a rolling enrollment where veterans can start at any point and finish the missed course at the start of the next cohort. This shift increased participation immediately.

Regarding the building and management of Ashley's Place, it became clear that an early investment in research to fully understand the extent of need among homeless, female veterans would have been beneficial prior to beginning the design and construction. By understanding the volume of homeless, female veterans, the occurrence of MST, the scope of family size, the geographic data and VA denotations of housing for this community better, the management and residency placement could have been more turnkey for U.S. Vets.

While none of these issues are dealbreakers, having an open conversation among all parties, backup plans and a willingness to monitor, learn and adapt is critical when creating new ideas and opportunities. "Open conversation and quick responses to changing conditions are necessary for optimal outcomes," says the Milanovich Trust.

Why Habitat for Humanity

Habitat for Humanity is uniquely positioned to serve U.S. veterans for several reasons, such as:

- Volunteerism has larger turnouts when veterans are the beneficiary. While HFH is already well-known for mobilizing record numbers of veterans, HFH CAZ saw higher volumes of hands raised when asked to support homeless, female veterans.
- Veterans often have a significant work history helping to qualify them as working-class poor. Veterans have demonstrated a willingness to work hard by way of their service to this country. Additionally, veterans qualify for housing support via the VA through programs that non-veterans do not have access to, which can help realize the HFH home-build model in new ways.
- HFH staff are no strangers to serving their country. Many staff across the organization have a heart for their fellow men and women in the military and bring that passion to their work,

similar to HFH CAZ CEO Jason Barlow. “It certainly felt like God was moving to make all of this come together so beautifully. We could have built two homes that would have served two families and that would have been great. But these homes will serve hundreds, if not thousands, of families in the building’s lifetimes. We were all proud just to be a part of it,” says Barlow.

- The values are aligned. Both HFH and veteran communities are committed to public service, hard work and security.

Since launching these three pilot projects, HFH CAZ saw support increase in a number of ways. New funds that otherwise would not have been realized have been awarded to HFH CAZ. Programs serving veterans attract a unique donor that wants to support those who served this country. Since 2020, HFH CAZ has raised approximately \$4M in new funding for these programs.

The HFH CAZ annual gala in 2022 featured a first-ever focus on veteran programs. The appeal included a testimonial from Fred Milanovich and a request to fund the veteran programs resulting in raising a seminal \$140,000 in support of this work through this hallmark event.

Moreover, there is myriad of government programs offering resources to veterans that could share the load in delivering HFH services to this demographic such as HUD VASH support, special mortgage lending programs, workforce development programs to sustain veteran income, along with other social services unique to this community and in line with implementing the HFH model. Additionally, special government grants are often awarded to veteran housing communities, enabling HFH to apply for new funding when investing in developing housing communities for veterans.

In summary, the opportunity to increase the donor base by diversifying the affiliate’s program offerings has proven to be strong when that case for support focuses on veterans.

Conclusion

The Trust team and HFH CAZ created a series of pilot programs to determine:

1. If we could successfully leverage a highly regarded program to effectively serve a specific deserving, vulnerable community,
2. If demand exists among veteran communities for these offerings, and
3. If other funders would get behind this work.

The partners are extremely pleased with the results to date. In a very short time, HFH CAZ has become the leading Habitat affiliate serving veterans. This new leadership position tells us that we are on the right track. However, more work is needed to better understand how to best replicate this invaluable work. Many HFH affiliates are offering support to serve veterans in various ways. The Trust and HFH seek to collect and codify those programs to learn together and scale the best models for change. One idea we hope to collectively launch is an HFH Veteran Network to share lessons learned and resources. We know that change requires more than a pilot affiliate and a funder willing to invest in high-risk philanthropy. It requires invitation and focus. With more input and participation, we hope to scale this work in areas with a large base of veterans and adapt great work to a highly deserving community.