



Reaching Functional Zero Veteran Homelessness: St. Thomas-Elgin Case Study

April 2023

St. Thomas-Elgin, Ontario: Veteran Functional Zero Case Study


On February 28, 2023, St. Thomas-Elgin became the second community in Canada to end veteran homelessness.



Here's how they did it.



The Achievement



2021: Joined Built for Zero Canada (BFZ-C)

Milestone Achievements on the Journey to Functional Zero:

September 2021: Quality By-Name List

August 2022: Veteran Quality By-Name List

February 2023: Reaching Home Quality Coordinated Access

February 2023: Achieved Functional Zero Veteran Homelessness

Next Focus:

- *Absolute Zero Veteran Homelessness*
- *Apply learnings towards Functional Zero Chronic Homelessness*

In February 2023, St. Thomas-Elgin became the second community in Canada to achieve Functional Zero Veteran Homelessness as part of Built for Zero Canada, a national movement of over 40 communities working to end chronic and veteran homelessness.

But what does that mean?

Modern mass homelessness was created by policy when the federal government stopped building housing in the 1980s and 1990s. The term "homelessness" encompasses a range of housing and shelter circumstances, including unsheltered homelessness; people staying in emergency shelters or other emergency accommodation; people living in provisional circumstances, like 'couch surfing'; and those who are at a high risk of homelessness.

Built for Zero Canada communities are proving that homelessness is solvable. When this case study refers to ending or solving veteran homelessness, this means the community has reached Functional Zero Veteran Homelessness. Homelessness is not a static issue. People move in and out of homelessness every day. Functional Zero Veteran Homelessness is a dynamic milestone, that means the number of veterans experiencing homelessness is less than

or equal to the number of veterans a community has proven it can house in a month. The number of veterans experiencing homelessness must be at or below a community's six-month average housing rate for veterans (or three or less actively homeless veterans, whichever is greater) for at least three consecutive months.

Then, there is a rigorous verification process, led by the Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness to confirm Functional Zero Veteran Homelessness.

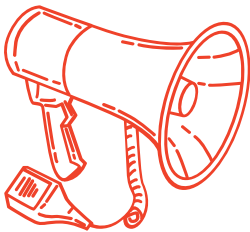
It requires the local community to demonstrate they have quality data and a system designed to ensure veteran homelessness is rare, brief, and non-recurring. It also includes the completion of an internal case study, with the support of municipal and political leaders, the homeless-serving system, and veteran organizations —before the designation is approved.



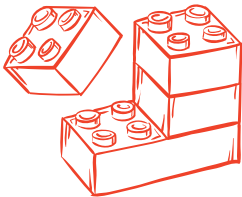
Why focus on solving Veteran Homelessness?



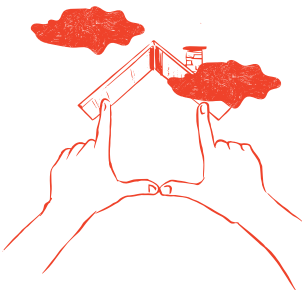
Duty to those who served for us



To build public support



Building blocks for ending all homelessness



To Prove it is possible



In this case study, veterans are defined as people who had served with the Canadian Armed Forces, members of an Allied Force, RCMP, Canadian Rangers, or were former Reservists and Veteran Civilians.

Since St. Thomas-Elgin's six-month average housing rate for veterans was less than three, the community's Functional Zero threshold was defined as having less than three veterans experiencing homelessness for three consecutive months. This was the same for London, Ontario, which was the first community to end homelessness for veterans in October 2020.

St. Thomas-Elgin's milestone has proven that reaching and sustaining functional zero is possible.

They have established a system that shows that homelessness for a population can be prevented, reduced, and ended, even as homelessness is increasing across the country.

For additional information on the functional zero definition and Built for Zero Canada's work to end veteran homelessness, you can check out:

<https://bfzcanada.ca/veterans/>.

How did they do it?

After joining Built for Zero Canada in 2021, St. Thomas-Elgin developed a rapid response system for supporting unhoused veterans by adopting some core principles.

Partnering and building a strong relationship among local veteran organizations including the Royal Canadian Legion and Veterans Affairs Canada, and the local homeless-serving system partners such as St. Thomas-Elgin Social Services, YWCA St. Thomas-Elgin, Canadian Mental Health Association Elgin, West Elgin Community Health Centre, and The Inn – was critical for accurately capturing and responding to veteran homelessness. Forming a local team to end veteran homelessness is also a foundational step to demonstrate commitment and action efforts toward the goal.

The team brought together local leaders to assist them in their journey to form a By-Name List. A By-Name List is a comprehensive, real-time list of all people experiencing homelessness in the community. The list is a powerful tool that tracks the number of actively homeless veterans in the region. It monitors the inflow of people who enter homelessness, and the outflow of those who have secured a home. This aggregate data allows for advocacy and responses that are as dynamic as the problem. The person-specific data on veterans allows communities to understand a veteran's unique needs and preferences, and to coordinate access to housing resources that meet their needs.

A By-Name List also increases confidence in the picture of veteran homelessness and offers a basis for collaboration around this accurate picture.

The St. Thomas-Elgin team recognized the importance of asking about veteran identity to accurately capture veteran homelessness on their By-Name List and assess how they could best address veteran homelessness.

The team learned that veterans may be hesitant to identify as veterans for many different reasons, including a military culture of not considering some forms of service the same as others. Oftentimes, people may not know that their service qualifies them as a veteran, so service providers engaged with the Royal Canadian Legion to learn about veteran identity and military culture. St. Thomas-Elgin's partnership with the Royal Canadian Legion was instrumental in reaching Functional Zero Veteran Homelessness. The partnership allowed the local team to approach veterans with care and learn about their identity in a thoughtful manner without making them feel uncomfortable.

- Specifically, asking broad questions were important as trust was being built with a potential veteran. Instead of saying "Are you veteran?" the team phrased their questions as "Have you served?" or "Have you ever worn a uniform for your country?"
- Instead of facilitating a yes or no answer, phrasing questions in that light allowed veterans to take control of the conversation and reveal details that they felt comfortable sharing.

- Finally, ending conversations by thanking veterans built another layer of trust between service providers and prospective veterans.

With that veteran identify framework in hand, two **"sprints"** were held between July and August 2022 and January and February 2023.

In a sprint, staff re-asked all people experiencing homelessness on the By-Name List about their veteran identity. No veterans experiencing homelessness were identified before these sprints, but afterwards, **four veterans were identified and have been supported to move-in.**

As soon as a veteran is identified as experiencing homelessness, the local team works closely with the Royal Canadian Legion to verify status and assess eligibility for services. All partners in St. Thomas-Elgin's local Built for Zero team coordinate referrals to housing and wrap-around supports that meet the veteran's needs, and support veterans to move-in and remain stable in their housing. No veterans have returned from housing since the community's achievement of a Veteran Quality By-Name List in August 2022.

While the number of veterans housed through this work may seem small, it has taken significant community transformation to build for zero. This confirmation means that St. Thomas-Elgin has built a system that can respond quickly to veterans who become homeless and ensure that homelessness is rare, brief, and non-reoccurring.

Shawn's Story

Shawn grew up around the military.

His mom and stepdad met in the armed forces, and the minute Shawn became eligible, he wanted to follow in their footsteps: he signed up for the army.

However, after four and a half years of service, including deployments to Afghanistan and Bosnia and Herzegovina, he struggled to adjust to a routine life in Port Stanley, Ontario. While on base, Shawn, now 40, was taught to walk on the right hand of the sidewalk, march, and never have his hands in his pockets. The newfound freedom of civilian life overwhelmed him.

"Being a civilian and thinking, 'Oh I can go out drinking, I can grow my hairline, I can grow a beard.' I could do whatever I want," he said. "Joining when I was so young, and then leaving when I was 21, I went from being a teenager to being an adult. I didn't know how to function in life without being told what to do."

He spent about a decade living on the streets in Elgin County during his twenties. But 10 years ago, he started to earn a steady income as a licensed mechanic. Last fall, in fact, Shawn took a job as an auto mechanic at a tow truck company.

After his first week of work, though, his hours started to dip.

By December, with the holiday season approaching, he was laid off and didn't have money to pay for groceries, rent, or gifts for his two sons.

He went to a local food bank, and was given contact information for Tanya Dale, Rural Homelessness Systems Navigator at the West Elgin Community Health Centre—a local partner of St. Thomas-Elgin's Built for Zero team.

Because St. Thomas-Elgin had a coordinated system in place and built a relationship with organizations like West Elgin Community

Health, Shawn received help before his situation got worse.

He was added to the community's By-Name List and guided through St. Thomas-Elgin's support system, including a coordinated and trained approach for asking about his veteran identity. Using language and tips from the Legion, Shawn was also given the space to talk about his military past in a way he felt comfortable doing.

Before connecting with Dale, he never knew there were support systems for veterans.

“ It's not often that you're recognized for the service that you did, After all the trauma I went through in the army, it's nice to know there are [groups] that are there to help members that are having a tough life.

- Shawn, St Thomas-Elgin Veteran

The team mediated with his landlord and let him stay in his home as they figured out how to help him pay rent.

“Shawn's an amazing young man,” Dale said. “He's part of the community, part of the church, and wants to be here.”

To Shawn, the structure of St. Thomas-Elgin's veteran framework allowed him to get back on his feet and look forward to getting back into the work force.

“ It pretty much saved my life.





Summary of St. Thomas-Elgin's Strengths

Community Commitment

From veteran organizations to city and county officials, the entire St. Thomas-Elgin community shared a common goal to end homelessness for veterans.

"St. Thomas-Elgin is a compassionate, dedicated and hard-working municipality that shares a vision to achieve housing stability for all," said Danielle Neilson, Supervisor of Homelessness Prevention and Housing Programs with St. Thomas-Elgin Social Services, and the local Built for Zero Canada lead.

All members of the team bought into that vision, and that buy-in allowed them to work across their community to reach Functional Zero Veteran Homelessness. Having council demonstrate this leadership and commitment was critical for maintaining focus and drive toward the goal.

"The true test of a city's success is how it cares for and elevates its most vulnerable members. [We] strive to be a city of compassion and one that offers supports to those in need to assist them in achieving stability," added Joe Preston, Mayor of St. Thomas.

A Coordinated Approach

To solve homelessness, communities need real-time, person-specific data.

By becoming a Built for Zero Canada community, St. Thomas-Elgin was uniquely positioned to end homelessness because they set up the necessary systems and approaches—a By-Name List, tools on how to ask about veteran identity, a Housing First approach, and a coordinated response system—to address veteran homelessness.

The coordinated process works like this:

First, a Data lead informs a Veteran lead as soon as a veteran is identified.

Next, the Royal Canadian Legion supports their status verification and assesses their eligible housing and supports.

The Veteran lead then connects the veteran experiencing homelessness with the Legion, Veteran Affairs Canada, and other housing providers to coordinate referrals to housing and wrap around supports, prioritize the veteran for available housing resources that match their needs and preferences, and finally, help the veteran to move-in and remain stable in their housing.

"We will make every effort to ensure no one is left behind. Together we will continue to combine our knowledge and resources to provide the best

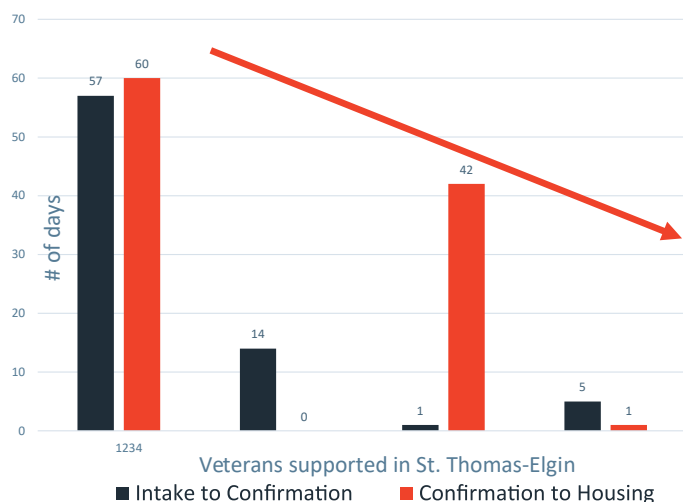


possible services to the people we serve," said Connie Cooper, Housing Program Coordinator with St. Thomas-Elgin Social Services, and local Veteran lead.

Data for Action & Improvement

St. Thomas-Elgin regularly monitored and acted on their By-Name List data to continuously improve how veterans are supported.

For example, the community tracked lengths of time between key stages in the housing process to learn about bright spots, bottlenecks, and how to improve. They found that using real-time data from the By-Name List to connect veterans to housing and supports is fast. Due to the strong connection with the Legion to quickly confirm veteran status and identify eligible supports, the average length of time between meeting a potential veteran to confirming their veteran status was 19 days.



Continuously improving how quickly veterans are supported from identification to housing.

Afterwards, the time from the confirmation to finding them secure housing was less than a month, only 26 days.

A Model for the Future

The St. Thomas-Elgin homelessness response model has built a strong connection in the community and established a culture where people are continually improving and looking to address gaps in the system. That belief will be crucial as they strive to reach absolute zero homelessness.

"Homelessness may never be eradicated, but with determination, fierce advocacy and continued learning, we will make every effort to ensure no one is left behind," said Connie Cooper, local Veteran lead.

"Together with our community partners, we will continue to combine our knowledge and resources to provide the best possible services to the people we serve. We will continue to serve our community with the utmost dignity and deepest respect".

What's Next?

Moving forward, St. Thomas-Elgin holds aspirations to reach absolute zero homelessness.

To get there, the community will continue to strengthen partnerships with veteran organizations and prioritize veterans experiencing homelessness for housing opportunities when they meet eligibility criteria.

Additionally, they will conduct sprints every six months and improve the pathways that have led them to the functional zero designation.

"BFZ-C staff have encouraged us to hold each other accountable, to keep our eye on the vision to end homelessness, and to push forward every step of the way," said Heather Sheridan, Director of St. Thomas-Elgin Social Services, and local Built for Zero Canada Champion.

"Their guidance and knowledge of best practices have been front and centre, fueling the compassion and collaborative spirit our community already has!"



Acknowledgements

Local Team

Community Champion: Heather Sheridan, Director of St. Thomas-Elgin Social Services

Community Lead: Danielle Neilson, Homelessness Prevention and Housing Programs Supervisor, St. Thomas-Elgin Social Services

Community Veteran Lead: Connie Cooper, Housing Program Coordinator, St. Thomas-Elgin Social Services

Data Lead: Valerie Beneteau, Housing and Homelessness System Coordinator, YWCA St. Thomas-Elgin

Built for Zero Canada Team

Improvement Advisor: Lisa Bell

Director of Built for Zero Canada: Marie Morrison

Funding Partner



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Key Partners: Veteran Organizations



Key Partners: Homeless-Serving Organizations





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