



Testimony of the
National Coalition
for Homeless Veterans

Before the

**United States Senate
Committee on Banking, Housing
and Urban Affairs**

**Subcommittee on Housing, Transportation,
and Community Development**

Ending Veterans' Homelessness

November 10, 2009

**Chairman Menendez, Ranking Member Senator Vitter,
and Distinguished Members of the Committee:**

The National Coalition for Homeless Veterans (NCHV) is honored to appear before this committee today to comment on ending veterans' homelessness.

For 20 years, NCHV has worked diligently to serve as the nation's primary liaison between the community- and faith-based organizations that help homeless veterans, the Congress, and the federal agencies that are invested in the campaign to end veteran homelessness in the United States.

The efforts have been commendable and we are grateful that we have such dedicated and passionate leadership within the Department of Veterans Affairs, Department of Labor and the Department of Housing and Urban Development. Through the VA's Grant and Per Diem program over 15,000 veterans are being served in transitional housing programs each year. The Homeless Veterans Reintegration Program (HVRP), administered by the Department of Labor-Veterans Employment and Training Service, has continued to grow each year and now serves veterans in nearly 100 communities throughout the country. HUD has expanded its efforts through the HUD-VA Supportive Housing Program (HUD-VASH) for those veterans who have serious mental illness or disabilities that keep them from living successfully on their own. Through these efforts and the efforts of the community-based partners NCHV represents, we have made significant progress in the effort to end veteran homelessness. However, our work is not done until the last veteran is off the streets.

In March of this year, President Obama stated, "We will provide new help for homeless Veterans because those heroes have a home – it's the country they served, the United States of America. And until we reach a day when not a single Veteran sleeps on our nation's streets, our work remains unfinished." This bold statement has served as the catalyst for creating a Five-Year Plan to End Homelessness Among Veterans, an initiative of VA Secretary Eric Shinseki. Just last week at a summit hosted by the VA, Secretary Shinseki stated, "Let me reiterate that this is not a summit on homeless veterans – it's a summit to end homelessness among veterans. That's our purpose. President Obama and I are personally committed to ending homelessness among veterans within the next five years."

To demonstrate his commitment, Secretary Shinseki has created a five-year plan that would expand the VA's partnerships and collaborations between the federal agencies and community-based service providers. Four of the six strategic pillars of the plan build upon the work of the past two decades: outreach, treatment, employment and benefits, and community partnerships. Two represent new critical focuses – prevention, and housing and supportive services for low-income veterans.

Currently there are 14 bills pending before the House of Representatives and the Senate that would have a direct impact on the delivery of services to homeless veterans and those at risk of becoming homeless. These bills would move Secretary Shinseki's historic plan forward.

NCHV acknowledges the leadership role of this subcommittee, and that of the full committee, in this noble effort. There are three key bills that lay the foundation on which we, as a nation, can build a successful, comprehensive campaign to end and prevent homelessness among veterans and fulfill the Secretary's Five-Year Plan.

S. 1547 – Zero Tolerance for Veteran Homelessness Act of 2009

For several years the homeless veteran assistance movement NCHV represents has realized there can be no end to veteran homelessness until we develop a strategy to address the needs of our former guardians before they become homeless – victims of health and economic misfortunes they cannot overcome without assistance.

The causes of all homelessness can be grouped into three primary categories: health issues, economic issues, and lack of access to safe, affordable housing for low- and extreme-low income families in most American communities.

The additional stressors veterans experience are prolonged separation from family and social support networks while engaging in extremely stressful training and occupational assignments; war-related illnesses and disabilities – both mental and physical; and the difficulty of many to transfer military occupational skills into the civilian workforce.

NCHV believes the *Zero Tolerance for Veteran Homelessness Act of 2009*, introduced by Senators Reed, Bond, Murray, Johnson, Kerry and Durbin – with the support of 12 cosponsors – has the potential to set this nation on course to finally achieve victory in the campaign to end veteran homelessness in the United States.

Victory in this campaign requires success on two fronts – effective, economical intervention strategies that help men and women rise above adversity to regain control of their lives; and prevention strategies that empower communities to support our wounded warriors and their families before they lose their ability to cope with stressors beyond their control.

We believe the *Zero Tolerance for Veteran Homelessness Act* addresses needs on both fronts.

- The Act provides for the expansion of HUD-VASH to a total of 60,000 housing vouchers for veterans with serious mental and emotional illnesses, other disabilities, and extreme low-income veteran families that will need additional services to remain housed. According to an analysis of data by the National Alliance to End Homelessness, about 63,000 veterans can be classified as chronically homeless. ***This Act would, therefore, effectively end chronic veteran homelessness within the next five years.***
- The Act provides authorization for up to \$50 million annually to provide supportive services for low-income veterans to reduce their risks of becoming homeless, and to help those who are find housing. Provisions include short- to medium-term rental assistance, poor credit history repair, housing search and relocation assistance, and help with security and utilities deposits. For many among the nation's 630,000 veterans living in extreme

- The Act would modernize the extremely important and successful VA Grant and Per Diem Program (GPD) to allow for the utilization of innovative project funding strategies – including the use of low-income housing tax credits and matching funds from other government sources to facilitate and hasten project development.
- The Act calls for the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to study the method of reimbursing GPD community providers for their program expenses and report to Congress, within one year, his recommendations for revising the payment system. For years service providers have appealed for a system that reflects the actual cost of providing services to veterans with multiple barriers to recovery rather than a “per diem” rate based on reimbursements paid to state veterans’ homes.
- The Act calls for an increase in the annual GPD authorization to \$200 million, beginning in FY 2010, which could provide additional funds for outreach through community-based veteran service centers and mobile service vans for rural areas, while continuing to increase the bed capacity of VA’s community-based partners. These outreach initiatives will likely play a pivotal role as the VA’s veteran homelessness prevention strategy moves forward.
- The Act would establish within HUD a Special Assistant for Veterans Affairs to ensure veterans have access to housing and homeless assistance programs funded by the Department.

S. 1160 – The Homes for Heroes Act of 2009

One of the greatest challenges community-based organizations face is how to provide long-term housing and services to veterans and their families. Due to multiple deployments, financial difficulties, disabilities sustained in combat and other family stressors, family members and the children of veterans often are in need of support and services when their loved ones come back from war. Currently, community-based providers are unable to access dedicated funding to pay for housing or services for veteran families. The *Homes for Heroes Act* provides funding for the development of housing for low-income veteran families and provides the mechanism to distribute these much needed supportive services.

According to the 2009 VA CHALENG survey, long-term housing ranks in the top 10 reported unmet needs of veterans. Finding and obtaining safe and secure housing is often the biggest obstacle veterans in recovery face. This bill will allow low- and extremely low-income veterans to access housing and the vital services they need in order to be successful citizens.

Introduced by Sen. Charles Schumer, Durbin, Brown, and Menendez, the *Homes for Heroes Act* would:

- Provide \$200 million annually for the development of supportive housing for veterans who need case management and wrap-around services to remain housed.
- Fund 20,000 rental assistance vouchers for extremely low-income veteran families (those living at or below 50 percent of the federal poverty level), estimated at approximately 630,000 veterans. These individuals represent those who are at highest risk of becoming homeless and most in need of prevention supports.
- Create the position of veteran liaison within the Department of Housing and Urban Development to ensure veteran inclusion in all HUD housing programs, and require inclusion of veteran data in local housing plans.

More and more families are requesting services and affordable housing, and providing this support would reduce the likelihood that many veteran families in crisis will continue on a downward spiral into homelessness.

S. 1237 – Homeless Women Veterans and Homeless Veterans With Children Act of 2009

One of the most daunting challenges in the campaign to end veteran homelessness is presented by the changes in the demographics of this special needs population. For the first time in American history, women comprise more than 11% of the forces deployed to serve in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, according to Department of Defense (DoD) figures early this year, including more than 30,000 single women with dependent children (DoD, March 2009). The VA anticipates women will account for 15% of the nation’s veterans within the next 10 years.

Because of the nation’s reliance on Reserve and National Guard personnel, men and women must leave their families at the highest rate since World War II – approximately half of them for multiple deployments. This places considerable strain on family relationships, which in turn makes the difficult process of readjustment to civilian life after wartime service even more stressful.

Currently more than 5% of veterans requesting assistance from VA and community-based homeless veteran service providers are women. According to VA officials, more than half of these veterans are between the ages of 20-29, a majority represent minority communities, and roughly 24% are disabled or were medically retired from the service. More than 10% of these women have dependent children.

Senators Murray, Johnson and Reed, in introducing this bill, recognize the same readjustment difficulties for single women veteran parents are experienced by single male parents. During the last two years, more than 11% of male veterans receiving housing vouchers in the HUD-VASH program are single parents with dependent children, according to VA officials.

According to VA data in its annual CHALENG Reports, the highest unmet needs of homeless single veterans with dependent children are:

- Child care assistance
- Legal aid for credit repair and child support issues
- Access to affordable permanent housing

S. 1237 would authorize up to \$10 million in grants to community- and faith-based organizations to provide critical, specialized supports for these deserving men and women as they work their way out of homelessness. There are about 200 homeless veteran assistance providers under the VA Homeless Providers Grant and Per Diem Program (GPD) that offer housing assistance for women veterans. More than 90 community-based programs offer job preparation and placement assistance to homeless veterans under the Homeless Veterans Reintegration Program – one of the most efficient, effective programs in the Department of Labor portfolio.

These programs provide irrefutable evidence that stable, safe transitional housing – with access to health and employment services – empowers the great majority of homeless veterans to achieve self-sufficiency within their eligibility limits. The addition of child care assistance promises to enhance those successful outcomes through supports that will enable veteran parents to pursue their employment goals without having to worry about the health and safety of their children.

NCHV believes this funding level would allow for immediate implementation of an employment assistance program for homeless women and homeless single parents with dependent children within an existing and highly successful service provider community, and allow for evaluation of the effectiveness of this innovative strategy.

In Summation,

On this day before Veterans Day, I want to thank you for your support helping the men and women who have served this country in their greatest hour of need. The successes we have seen in decreasing the number of homeless veterans over the last five years would not have happened without your support and leadership.

These three bills are vital for the Secretary's Five-Year Plan to move forward. From the increase in the number of HUD-VASH vouchers, and the ability to provide supportive services for low-income and women veterans, to the improvement and expansion of the GPD program, these bills provide real opportunities to move the PLAN into ACTION and fulfill the historic mission to end homelessness among America's former guardians in five years.

Once again, on behalf of the veterans we all serve, thank you for your support. I can think of no better way to say "thank you" to those who have served this nation than continuing to serve those veterans who need our help the most.