



NATIONAL COALITION *for* HOMELESS VETERANS

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Statement for the Record of the

National Coalition for Homeless Veterans

Before the

Subcommittee on Housing and Transportation

Committee on Banking, Housing, and Urban Affairs

United States Senate

Hearing on Meeting the Housing Needs of Veterans

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Executive Summary

Homelessness among Veterans

- Nearly 200,000 veterans are homeless on any given night; more than 400,000 experience homelessness over the course of a year.
- Like their non-veteran counterparts, veterans are at high risk of homelessness due to a lack of access to comprehensive health care, extremely low or no livable income and an extreme lack of affordable housing.
- In addition to these shared factors, a large number of homeless veterans experience problems that are directly traceable to their experience before or during their military service or to their return to civilian society without appropriate transitional supports.
- Preventing and ending homelessness among veterans requires general responses of benefit to all homeless persons and persons at risk for homelessness and specialized responses targeted to homeless veterans.

Permanent Housing for Veterans

- VA and HUD homeless programs are woefully under-funded and many homeless veterans are not served by them.
- Missing altogether in the federal housing continuum are affordable housing strategies targeted to low-income veterans.
- Congress and HUD should immediately fill the backlog of 2,000 authorized but not yet allocated vouchers to the HUD-Veterans Affairs Supported Housing (HUD-VASH) program, and ultimately increase to at least 20,000 the number of HUD-VASH vouchers.
- Congress should enact the Homes for Heroes Act (S. 3475/H.R. 5561), legislation to develop and expand permanent housing opportunities for very low-income veterans.

Introduction

The National Coalition for Homeless Veterans appreciates the opportunity to testify before the Senate Banking, Housing, and Urban Affairs Subcommittee on Housing and Transportation at its hearing on meeting the housing needs of veterans.

The National Coalition for Homeless Veterans (NCHV), established in 1990, is a nonprofit organization with the mission of ending homelessness among veterans by shaping public policy, promoting collaboration, and building the capacity of service providers. NCHV's over 250 member organizations in the states and territories provide housing and supportive services to homeless veterans and their families, such as street outreach, drop-in centers, emergency shelter, transitional housing, permanent housing, recuperative care, hospice care, food and clothing, primary health care, addiction and mental health services, employment supports, educational assistance, legal aid and veterans' and public benefit advocacy.

The VA estimates that nearly 200,000 veterans are homeless on any given night; more than 400,000 experience homelessness over the course of a year. Conservatively, one of every three homeless adult males sleeping in a doorway, alley, box, car, barn or other location not fit for human habitation in our urban, suburban, and rural communities has served our nation in the Armed Forces. Homeless veterans are mostly males (2 percent are females). 54 percent are people of color. The vast majority are single, although service providers are reporting an increased number of veterans with children seeking their assistance. 45 percent have a mental illness. 50 percent have an addiction.

America's homeless veterans have served in World War II, Korea, the Cold War, Vietnam, Grenada, Panama, Lebanon, anti-drug cultivation efforts in South America, Afghanistan, and

Iraq. 47 percent of homeless veterans served during the Vietnam Era. More than 67 percent served our nation for at least three years.

Male veterans are 1.3 times as likely to become homeless as their non-veteran counterparts, and female veterans are 3.6 times as likely to become homeless as their non-veteran counterparts. A random survey of homeless veteran service providers conducted in November 2005 by NCHV suggests the homeless veteran population is changing in profile. Results of the survey identify three veteran subpopulations that may present significant increases in demand for services in the immediate future: aging Vietnam veterans, women veterans, and combat veterans of America's current operations in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Like their non-veteran counterparts, veterans become homeless when their incomes are too low to obtain affordable housing in their community or when there is an insufficient stock of affordable housing available where they live. In some cases, their incomes may have diminished because of a disabling condition or injury – including service-connected disabilities – preventing them from holding a job. They may be ineligible for or have barriers to receiving public or veteran income assistance, or be unable to secure a job that pays a living wage because they lack appropriate job skills transferable to the civilian market. They may also have had issues before entering the military, including poverty, lack of educational opportunities, an unstable family background or a history of social problems. In addition to these shared factors, some veterans at risk of homelessness live with post traumatic stress disorders and addictions acquired during or exacerbated by their military service. These conditions can then interrupt their ability to keep a job, establish savings, and in some cases, maintain family harmony and remain in the family's housing. Veterans' social and professional networks may have been fractured due to extensive mobility while in service or lengthy periods away from their hometowns and their civilian jobs,

leading to difficulty returning to work or in sharing the housing of others. These problems are directly traceable to their experience in military service or to their return to civilian society without appropriate transitional supports.

Ending homelessness among veterans requires public commitment and action to ensure their access to permanent housing, livable incomes, and health security. This must be accomplished both through general responses of benefit to all homeless persons and persons at-risk of homelessness and through specialized responses targeted to homeless veterans.

There is no more obvious a response to preventing homelessness among veterans than to ensure low-income veterans' access to permanent affordable housing so that they are never without a safe place to live in the first place.

Permanent Housing for Veterans

Over 60 years ago, when Congress passed the GI Bill, it provided an assurance of homeownership opportunities for veterans through the VA Home Loan Guaranty Program. However, Congress made no such comparable assurance to affordable rental housing opportunities for our nation's low-income veterans, and still has yet to do so.

The VA Home Loan Guaranty Program is the principal federal veterans' housing program. It helps veterans finance the purchase of homes with favorable loan terms and at a rate of interest competitive with the rate charged on other types of mortgage loans. The Home Loan Program – effective as it is – does not meet and was not designed to meet the housing assistance needs of all veterans, especially veterans without resources to purchase a home such as veterans experiencing homelessness.

At the other end of the federal housing continuum, VA and HUD homeless programs such as VA Homeless Provider Grant and Per Diem, HUD McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance, and

HUD-Veterans Affairs Supportive Housing (HUD-VASH) play vital roles in establishing a housing safety net for veterans whose living arrangements have tumbled to the depths. Each of these programs is woefully under-resourced and many homeless veterans are not served by them. Funding for these programs should be increased.

Missing altogether in the federal housing continuum are affordable housing strategies targeted to low-income veterans.

Congress has not yet granted the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development – or any federal department – the statutory authority to establish permanent affordable housing programs targeted to low-income veterans. Accordingly, there is no national rental housing assistance program targeted to low-income veterans. Veterans are no longer a federal priority population for federally-subsidized housing assistance. (They once were.) Veterans of working age and without disabilities are not well-served through existing rental housing assistance programs due to their program designs.

In those areas where it has discretion, HUD has underperformed when it comes to veterans. Of greatest consequence, HUD has discontinued its requests for or contribution of Housing Choice Vouchers to the HUD-VASH program, the only federal affordable housing assistance program targeted to any veteran population, in this case homeless veterans with disabilities.

With all of these gaps in housing support for both low-income veterans and homeless veterans, it is apparent why many veterans are experiencing an affordable housing or homelessness crisis. It is imperative that Congress take immediate action to remedy the deficit in preventive and response strategies. Recommended steps include increasing the number of Housing Choice Vouchers allocated to the HUD-VASH program and passing the Homes for Heroes Act.

The Homeless Veterans Comprehensive Assistance Act of 2001 (P.L. 107-95) codified the HUD-Veterans Affairs Supported Housing (VASH) program (at 42 U.S.C. 1437f (o)(19), which heretofore had existed via a Memorandum of Agreement between HUD and VA. The HUD-VASH program provides permanent housing subsidies and case management services to homeless veterans with mental and addictive disorders. Under the program, VA screens homeless veterans for program eligibility and provides case management services to enrollees. HUD allocates rental subsidies from its Housing Choice Voucher program to the VA, which then distributes them to the enrollees. Rigorous evaluation of the program indicates it significantly reduces days of homelessness for veterans with mental and addictive disorders.

Under the Homeless Veterans Comprehensive Assistance Act of 2001, Congress authorized HUD to allocate 500 additional HUD-VASH vouchers in each of FY 2003 through FY 2006. By 2006, this would have amounted to 2,000 additional vouchers targeted to chronically homeless veterans. Regrettably, HUD did not request funding for, and Congress did not appropriate funds for, these additional HUD-VASH vouchers in any of its budget submissions for those fiscal years. Nor did it request funding for the vouchers in its FY 2007 budget.

Accordingly, we call Congress to immediately fund the entire backlog of 2,000 HUD-VASH vouchers. Ultimately, we recommend Congress authorize and appropriate funds for a dramatic increase in HUD-VASH program to 20,000 vouchers, which while a significant increase is still only a mere five percent of the number of veterans who experience homelessness annually. When growing the program, Congress should add budget authority explicitly for these vouchers so that they truly add affordable housing capacity rather than merely displace other needy persons with homeless veterans.

Beyond HUD-VASH, we call on Congress to take bold steps and establish new affordable housing initiatives targeted to low-income veterans as well as to increase such veterans' access to existing housing programs. The establishment of low-income veteran-specific permanent affordable housing initiatives is entirely consistent with the long history of our nation to establish programs and benefits unique to veterans in recognition of their service to the nation.

We are pleased to support the Homes for Heroes Act (S. 3475/H.R. 5561), legislation with the purpose of developing and expanding permanent housing opportunities for very low-income veterans. The Homes for Heroes Act would establish new programs pertaining to veterans within the Department of Housing and Urban Development. All federal departments – not solely the Department of Veterans Affairs – bear responsibility for supporting our nation's veterans. The Homes for Heroes Act would give HUD the tools to do so.

The Homes for Heroes Act consists of seven substantive sections. Section 2 establishes a position of Special Assistant for Veterans Affairs within HUD. Section 3 authorizes the HUD Secretary to establish a supportive housing program for very low-income veteran families. HUD would provide housing assistance to such veteran families via planning grants, capital advances, project rental assistance, and technical assistance to nonprofit organizations and consumer cooperatives proposing to develop such housing. VA would provide funding for supportive services to residents. Section 4 authorizes an increase in budget authority under the project rental assistance component of the Housing Choice Voucher program to finance 20,000 rental assistance vouchers for homeless veterans. Section 5 requires states and localities to include veterans as a special needs population in their public housing agency plans and their comprehensive housing affordability strategies. Section 6 exempts from calculation of a family's rental payment for federally assisted housing the amount of income the family receives

from VA compensation and benefits. Section 7 authorizes the HUD Secretary to establish a technical assistance program to assist veteran service providers on federally assisted housing matters. Section 8 requires HUD to issue an annual report on its programs and activities pertaining to veterans.

Each of these provisions responds to either: an obvious deficit in affordable housing stock or access to such stock for low-income or homeless veterans; a practical barrier to veterans' access to affordable rental housing intended to serve all Americans; or a missed leadership opportunity by HUD. We urge Congress to pass this path-breaking legislation.

Conclusion

Every one of our nation's military heroes deserves the opportunity for a safe, affordable, and permanent place to call home. The National Coalition for Homeless Veterans looks forward to continuing to work with Congress, the Administration, and other stakeholders to ensure that our nation does everything necessary to make this goal a reality for each veteran.