

Statement for the Record

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Chairman Menendez, Senator Vitter, and members of the committee: Thank you for this opportunity to testify on the difficulties our nation's homeless veteran's face and the steps our organization is taking to answer the call to end all homelessness among veterans within five years.

I am the executive director and founder of The G.I. Go Fund, a grassroots 501(c)(3) non-profit organization with a mission to assist our nation's heroes along the difficult path of transition.

The G.I. Go Fund was founded in 2006 following the death of one of my closest childhood friends, Army Lt. Seth Devorin, from wounds he suffered while attempting to dismantle an IED in Iraq. The organization began as a small community group, which aimed to preserve the memory of my friend through providing days of rest and relaxation to our nation's veterans. However, as we began to spend time with these men and women, we began to understand that their problems and their fears had not merely ended the minute they returned home and stepped on to American soil. In fact, they had just begun.

Our veterans, who have just endured and survived the unimaginable, are now expected to execute a smooth transition back to their civilian lives. They are expected to reestablish relationships with family and friends. They are expected to find either long-term, secure employment based on their "work" experience in the military or are expected to become a student utilizing the Post 9-11 GI Bill, all while being expected to tend to the physical and mental wounds associated with combat by fully utilizing their Veterans Administration benefits. It has been my experience that a fragmented transition, which results from one of these steps being missed or mishandled, leaves our veterans to

face a myriad of problems that can range from fractured family ties, unemployment, depression, and many others. This is all in addition to the veteran experiencing a physical or mental wound. These issues fester and manifest into a chronically debilitating ailment. Fragmented transitions often result in deep depressions and eventual substance abuse by our veterans who feel they have nowhere left to turn. Ultimately, a fragmented transition is the primary cause of homelessness among our nation's veterans, and we must formulate a two-pronged approach that first works to avoid future homelessness among new veterans, while simultaneously ending the current disaster.

This two-pronged approach was adopted by Mayor Cory A. Booker of Newark, New Jersey, who has partnered with our organization to provide the City with the first-ever nonprofit-run municipal office of veteran's affairs in the country, which assists returning veterans with their transition, while assisting the homeless veteran population to find suitable transitional housing.

Preventing Homelessness among Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans

When a soldier returns to the United States from Iraq or Afghanistan, he or she is immediately inundated with the problems many Americans face today, which include unemployment, an empty refrigerator, shut-off notices, or an eviction or foreclosure notice. While our organization has assisted thousands of American military families with these problems as they arise by hosting job fairs to address unemployment, providing direct financial assistance to help put food on the table and keep a roof over their heads, it is just never enough.

First, our nation's lending institutions need to be more understanding of the difficulties that our veterans face during their transition back to civilian life, by providing ample time for our veterans to secure a job to get their lives in order, and keep a roof over their families' heads.

However, the root of these financial difficulties usually stem from unemployment. Like any one of us here today, a veteran cannot pay for groceries if they are unemployed. A veteran cannot pay for utilities if they are unemployed. A veteran cannot pay a mortgage if they are unemployed. However, unlike the rest of us sitting here today, these men and women have been defending our nation's freedom against the threat of terrorism, causing them to miss years of their lives. Our nation's veterans deserve our patience, assistance, and understanding that it will take some time to put their lives back together.

To prevent homelessness among today's returning soldier we need to emphasize to employers the benefits of hiring a loyal, hardworking, dedicated veteran. With the unemployment rate among veterans up to three times higher than the national average, more and more of our nation's heroes are facing these financial disasters with little help. We need to expand the Department of Labor's Office of Federal Contract Compliance Programs (OFCCP), which oversees the hiring practices of federal contractors as it pertains to women, minorities, veterans, and people with disabilities. While the OFCCP requires that statistics be provided showing the number of women and minorities a federal contractor employs, no such requirements exist for their veteran employees. The federal government must be able to track the hiring practices of these federal contractors as they pertain to veterans. If and only if federal contractors, as well as all of our nation's

employers take affirmative action to hire our veterans now, will we be able to end the flow of veterans onto the streets.

Concurrent to providing veterans every employment opportunity and benefit, we must also find a more suitable, logical, and efficient method to help our veterans navigate the remaining complex process of transition. Our organization is in the process of creating a true “One Stop Center” that will make a veterans transition smooth, efficient, and effective. This center will provide office space to government agencies, nonprofits, and other organizations that play a vital role in a veteran’s transition. In one building a veteran will be able to find The Department of Veterans Affairs, The Department of Social Security, The Department of Labor, The USO, The Red Cross, and The Salvation Army, to name a few. With a center such as this, these stakeholders can come together and provide the most comprehensive approach to handling each individual veterans needs, and ensure that not one step, not one benefit, and not one piece of information is missed, ensuring that a veterans transition is complete rather than fragmented. We must always remember that homelessness is not an aberration, but rather it is always a result of leaving major steps of transition fragmented and unaddressed. We as a nation must recognize that the magnitude of information and services that are available to veterans is vast, but the implementation is disjointed. We need to remedy the issue from the root of the problem, and that problem is fragmentation.

Ending Homelessness among Veterans in Five Years:

On any given night in America, one third of all homeless people are men and women who once proudly wore our nation’s uniform. They live in boxes and under

bridges. They are our forgotten heroes. To end this national disaster, a vigorous series of partnerships between all branches of government and at all levels of government must be forged with community groups and faith-based organizations. All sectors of the community must come together with the common goal of ending homelessness among veterans.

However, these partnerships must result in veterans actually getting off the street and into housing rather than the same outreach techniques implemented in the past that do little more than to provide one day off of the streets for these veterans. Just last month our organization cosponsored our third Homeless Veterans Stand-Down in the city of Newark NJ, which provided for a hot meal, clothes, haircut, physical checkups, to name a few. There were also various government agencies in attendance to provide veterans with information on benefits. This is a day which on the surface appears like we did much to serve the veteran population, and it is a day that often times garners us many accolades and thanks, but the truth, however, is that I consider these days to be among my greatest failures as the Executive Director of The G.I. Go Fund. When the event is over, I get into my car and drive home, while these men and women are right back where they started, on the streets. The event amounts to little more than one nice day and a thank you for your service for a man or a woman who so desperately needs more.

This more can only come in the form of more housing and more beds to be made available for long-term transitional housing projects. Housing projects much like the one my organization along with the city of Newark, NJ is pursuing, which will rehabilitate an historic thirty three thousand square foot mansion that once belonged to the Frelinghuysen family of New Jersey to create a one-hundred bed long-term transitional

housing facility for homeless veterans. This facility will provide for medical treatment to homeless veterans, job counseling, and training for homeless veterans, substance abuse counseling for homeless veterans, but most importantly, it will provide a chance for these men and women to finally, after many years in the cold, get off the streets and into a home of their own.

It is unreasonable for us as a nation to expect these homeless veterans to rectify their situation without an address and a home they can call their own. We must ask ourselves: where would perspective employers mail correspondences to without an address? Where would government agencies that have benefits for these homeless veterans send information and payments to without an address? Still, more importantly, where will these homeless veterans, these brave men and women who fought to defend our streets not live on them, sleep, shower, and get dressed before their big interview without an address? The answer is nowhere, and that is why we need more long-term, transitional housing made available in every state in the country. In New Jersey, we currently have an estimated homeless veteran population of between seven thousand and nine thousand on any given night, but we have less than two hundred long-term transitional beds available.

I am sure that we can all agree that this math does not add up, and if more beds that provide proper training and counseling and long-term shelter are not made available, it will be impossible to meet the aggressive goal of ending homelessness among veterans within five years that President Obama and VA Secretary Shinseki have vowed to do.

Conclusion:

Again I would like to thank you Chairman Menendez, Senator Vitter, and all the members of the committee for providing me the time to speak about this important issue of ending homelessness among veterans within five years. While the task that lies before us is great, and the clock has already begun ticking, I leave here today deeply encouraged by the attention this committee has shined on the issue. I am encouraged that the Chairman of this committee, Chairman Menendez, has in his congressional office a liaison that fights for veterans' issues in the State of New Jersey with a passion that is unmatched. And I am most encouraged that President Obama and Secretary Shinseki have made ending homelessness among veterans a top priority of the new administration. I am encouraged but I am keenly aware of the enormity of the task at hand and I am ready to dig in and manifest the direction provided by the President and Congress. Thank You. I'll be glad to take your questions.