

**STATEMENT OF
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**SUBMITTED TO THE
Committee on Veterans' Affairs
U.S. House of Representatives
Hearing on Ending Veteran Homelessness**

December 11, 2014

Chairman Miller, Ranking Member Michaud, and Members of the Committee, as executive director of a community-based nonprofit organization that partners with the Department of Veterans Affairs, I thank you for inviting me to present our perspective on progress toward VA's goal of ending veteran homelessness by the end of 2015.

Founded in 1991 by a grassroots coalition of businesses, congregations and concerned community members, Friendship Place is a leader in Washington, D.C., in developing and implementing innovative solutions to homelessness that have demonstrable results and a lasting impact. Our customized, person-focused programs include street outreach, drop-in, free medical and psychiatric services, job placement, case management, transitional shelter, rapid rehousing, homelessness prevention, permanent supportive housing, specialized services for homeless youth and young adults, and rapid rehousing and homelessness prevention for veterans and their families. In 2013, we helped 1,000 people and in 2014, more than 2,000.

In October 2014, The Community Partnership for the Prevention of Homelessness (the agency responsible for coordinating DC's homeless services Continuum of Care) presented its 25th Anniversary Award "for extraordinary service to homeless single adults" to Friendship Place.

We accomplish our mission – to empower individuals and families experiencing or at risk of homelessness to rebuild their lives with the involvement of the community – with the help of more than 300 volunteers, who contributed almost 20,000 hours of service in the past year, and the support of 26 neighboring congregations, several of which partner with us to provide shelter or housing.

Friendship Place has participated in the DC VA Medical Center's annual January Stand Down, Winterhaven, since 2010. In October 2011, we received a small grant (as a subcontractor to another organization) to provide homelessness prevention and rapid rehousing services under VA's Supportive Services for Veteran Families (SSVF) program. In October 2012, we applied directly to VA and received a \$1 million SSVF grant for fiscal year 2013. Based on our successful outcomes, VA awarded Friendship Place Mentor Status, increased our SSVF funding to \$2 million for 2014, and renewed our contract at the same level for 2015. We call our SSVF program "Veterans First."

On June 18, Friendship Place launched Families First, a pilot project for veteran families in Prince George's County, Maryland, who need more support than SSVF can provide. With funding from the Maryland Department of Housing and Community Development and the Freddie Mac Foundation, Families First will serve 40 to 45 veteran families over the next three years. The goal of the program is to end both homelessness and poverty for the participating families. Case management places a special focus on increasing income through education, job placement, and benefits. Eligible families must have at least one dependent child and be below 50 percent of the Area Median Income. They are provided intensive case management for six months with possible re-certification for up to three years.

The Director of our Housing First Division and I are both members of the 25 Cities – a joint initiative of VA, the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), the U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness (USICH), Community Solutions, and the Rapid Results Institute – whose aim is to achieve VA's goal of ending veteran homelessness nationwide by the end of 2015 through implementing Coordinated Entry. Friendship Place has assumed a leadership role in implementing Coordinated Entry for DC through Veterans NOW and the 25 Cities Initiative (which will be folded into Zero:2016 in January 2015).

Based on our four years of experience working closely with both the DC VA Medical Center and VA's National Center on Homelessness among Veterans, we would like to present our perspective in four areas concerning Federal efforts to end veteran homelessness: (1) the SSVF program, (2) the joint VA-Department of Housing and Urban Development Supportive Housing Program (HUD-VASH), (3) the Department of Labor's Homeless Veterans Reintegration Program (HVRP), and (4) character-of-discharge issues in the SSVF program.

1) SSVF

In the previous year of our provision of SSVF services in DC and eight surrounding counties in Maryland and Virginia (fiscal year 2014):

- Our Veterans First program served 415 veteran households – 89 percent of them with Extremely Low household incomes (less than 30 percent of the Area Median Income)
- We exited 267 households, representing 461 individuals (including 147 children).
- 92 percent of those who exited (425) graduated to stable permanent housing.
- The average length of time from intake to exit was just under three months (88 days) for homelessness prevention and just over three months (104 days) for rapid rehousing.

In other words, 425 people who would have remained or become homeless but for our intervention are now safely housed and rebuilding their lives. The average cost per household served is less than \$5,000 – a small price to pay for stability for an entire family.

We know that the program is effective. The annual Point-in-Time enumeration reveals that the number of homeless veterans dropped by 23 percent in DC and by 20 percent in the Metro area from 2012 to 2014, at a time when homelessness among the general population has risen.

We would like to draw your attention to key features of the SSVF program that, from our perspective as a community provider, make it successful:

- It is based on nationally recognized best practices, including the Housing First service model.
- It is empowering. In the words of one of our Veterans First graduates, the program is a “hand up,” not a “hand out.” The service model recognizes that the individual or family is resilient and can rebuild quickly with the right kind of help.
- It is individualized and participant-centered. SSVF does not dictate that we deliver services in a cookie-cutter manner but gives us flexibility to provide exactly what each particular household needs – no more and no less – to transition rapidly into stable housing.
- Clinically, the program is backed by CARF, the national gold standard for rehabilitation services.
- SSVF is flexible, allowing us as the service provider to adapt services to the local community and allowing veterans to transfer agencies and even regions.
- As a community-based organization, we can leverage additional resources – volunteer support, private donations, and in-kind contributions – to enhance the assistance we are able to provide.

More than anything, the success of the SSVF program is due to the outstanding expertise of the national VA leadership and their unfailing commitment to working collaboratively with their local grantees, including Friendship Place, to continually refine and improve the service model so as to ensure that we are achieving the desired results as effectively and efficiently as possible. We would like, in particular, to recognize the contributions of Mr. Vincent Kane, Director of the National Center on Homelessness among Veterans; Mr. John Kuhn, National Director of VA Homeless Prevention Services; Mr. Dennis Culhane, Director of Research; and Ms. Adrienne Melendez, who is the Regional Coordinator for SSVF for our region.

We applaud this VA team for providing excellent training (monthly webinars, regional meetings, SSVF universities), for fostering collaborative relationships among SSVF providers (coordinating regional meetings in which we can share our best practices), and for soliciting and being responsive to our feedback.

Here in DC, VA has moved quickly to establish a system of Coordinated Entry, while the DC VAMC has developed productive partnerships with community providers and successfully cut the time for HUD-VASH lease-ups.

2) HUD-VASH

The success of SSVF provides ample evidence that VA can make effective use of community-based organizations to get results in its efforts to end veteran homelessness. We believe that VA could adopt the same model – contracting out to community providers – to achieve outstanding outcomes in the HUD-VASH program, as well.

There would be several advantages to contracting out HUD-VASH case management services to community providers:

- Community providers can have smaller caseloads and, therefore, more intensive case management. In Housing First programs, the larger the caseload, the less likely it is that those served will achieve long-term housing stability; smaller caseloads produce higher housing retention rates. Programs with low retention rates are more costly to the taxpayer in the long run, because participants who return to the streets then seek out other services elsewhere.
- Community providers have maximum flexibility to adapt their programs to local needs and conditions.

- Successfully linking program participants to community resources is key to the success of any Housing First program, and community providers are more familiar with and connected to resources in the local community.
- Separating the funding source and the service provider allows for better checks and balances; the funding source can more objectively evaluate programs that are run by an outside provider.
- Unfortunately, some veterans are uncomfortable seeking services at VA because of negative experiences they may have had in the past.

Friendship Place has been providing Housing First services under a contract with the DC Department of Human Services since 2008, with an annual housing retention rate that consistently tops 98 percent. Our Housing First Director and I would be happy to meet with any interested Congressional or VA staff to provide greater detail on what makes our Housing First program successful and how a community-based model could be implemented by VA.

3) HVRP

In 2013 and again in 2014, Friendship Place considered applying to Department of Labor's Homeless Veterans Reintegration Program (HVRP) for funding to provide employment services to expedite the reintegration of homeless veterans into the labor force. We would like to share with you the reasons we decided not to pursue this funding opportunity.

We read in the Department of Labor's RFAs (SGA-13-02 and SGA 14-02/PY 2014) that we would have to require 80 percent of participants to take part in job training activities. This requirement runs counter to the philosophy and practice of client-centered programming, which eschews one-size-fits-all requirements in favor of tailoring services around the needs of the individual participant to facilitate achievement of his or her goal, which, in the case of an employment program, would be a stable job.

Friendship Place has considerable experience helping homeless individuals, both veterans and otherwise, transition successfully back into the workforce. Our Veterans First (SSVF) staff includes an Employment Specialist, who has placed 100 SSVF participants into jobs since October 2012. His experience has revealed the following:

- Only three or four of the veterans he has worked with had any interest in or need for job training. The rest had marketable skills and wanted to get into jobs as quickly as possible; they were aware of the clock ticking on the financial support they could count on from

SSVF and wanted to know that they would be earning an income soon to be able to pay the rent to keep their families housed.

- Requiring people to complete training they do not want or need delays their entrance into the workforce. It creates a barrier that is frustrating and discouraging to the veteran, especially when there is no promise of a job at the end of the training program.
- Requiring job training is disempowering; it fails to acknowledge that the veteran may have acquired valuable skills and knowledge during their service or previous work experience, let alone previous educational or training experience.
- The veterans who seek our help may have any of a number of barriers to employment that they need help addressing: lack of childcare, gaps in their employment history, lack of a resume, poor job interview skills, lack of transportation, health or disability issues, problematic background checks, and so on. Providing or paying for training that is not needed diverts valuable staff and financial resources away from systematically addressing these urgent issues.
- The veterans we work with need a job now. Empowering them to achieve that goal does not preclude future training to get a better job later. In fact, many of them tell us they intend to do that, but putting a roof over their heads and food on the table for their families is their first priority.

Just as VA's housing services have moved to Housing First in order to remove all barriers for veterans in need, the vocational system needs to move to Employment First, to ensure that veterans can access employment as quickly as possible. We at Friendship Place recommend that Congress consider a job placement program for veterans that would be implemented by community-based organizations and would be consistent with the client-centered, Housing First philosophy and practices of SSVF and HUD-VASH. Such a program would help veterans find and pay for training programs if they want and need job training, but it would not require them to participate in job training if they do not need or want it. Instead, it would give the service provider flexibility to work with the veteran on an individualized basis to move him or her into stable employment as quickly as possible. Job development – building relationships with employers in the community to create job opportunities for veterans whose resumes might not otherwise be considered – would be a key part of such a program.

We have found that targeting resources in this way is cost-effective. In addition to the employment services that Friendship Place provides as part of our SSVF program, we also run a privately funded job placement program called AimHire. In just over three years, AimHire has placed 308 people – either homeless or at risk of eviction – into jobs, while securing or stabilizing the housing of 302 of them. Focusing on job development and job placement rather than job training, employing the client-centered approach described above, and making use of a

cadre of skilled volunteers with human resources and business experience, AimHire has achieved this at a cost of about \$4,000 per household (individual or family), which includes placement into both employment and housing.

Our Veterans First Employment Specialist, AimHire Director and I would be happy to meet with any interested Congressional or VA staff to provide greater detail on what makes our employment programs successful and give input into the design of a similar VA or DOL program.

4) Character-of-Discharge Issues and SSVF

We would like to bring to your attention one final matter of great concern to all of us at Friendship Place.

Veterans with other than honorable discharges are among the most vulnerable of all the veterans that seek the help of our SSVF program. Eddie is a typical example; he was nearing completion of his enlistment with a record of exemplary service when his squad was attacked in Afghanistan and he was one of only a few survivors. He began self-medicating his PTSD, and ended up being discharged under other-than-honorable conditions.

It is our understanding that VA is currently reviewing its policies and authority to serve veterans with other than dishonorable discharges. If SSVF eligibility is limited to only those veterans that are eligible for VA health care, veterans like Eddie would be left out in the cold. Fortunately, we were able to get him legal assistance and walk him through the process of upgrading his discharge status, so that he is now VHA-eligible and can receive the help he needs and deserves.

Summary

We are excited and energized by VA's impressive progress toward ending veteran homelessness and are honored to partner in this admirable – and much-needed – work.

We believe that the following recommendations, if implemented, could expedite the success of VA's efforts:

1. Extend the authorization of appropriations for the highly successful SSVF program.
2. Contract out the provision of case management services for HUD-VASH to community providers.

3. Adopt the Housing First service model – low-barrier, client-centered – in employment programs offered to veterans (VA or DOL).
4. Continue to allow SSVF providers to serve any veteran with an honorable or other than honorable discharge.

These recommendations not only are aligned with best practices in the field of homeless services, but would, we believe, make VA's entire system of services for homeless and at-risk veterans and their families both more cost-effective and more humane.

Thank you for the opportunity to participate in this important discussion.