

U.S. House of Representatives, Committee on Veterans Affairs

Chairman: Mike Bost

Ranking Member: Mark Takano

Minnesota Assistance Council for Veterans Testimony

January 11th, 2024

Chairman Bost, Ranking Member Takano, and Committee Members, my name is Jon Lovald and I'm the Chief Operations Officer for the Minnesota Assistance Council for Veterans - MACV. We are a 501c3 statewide nonprofit with the mission to end veteran homelessness in Minnesota. I began with MACV in May of 2017. Before my time at MACV, I served in the Army and Minnesota National Guard for 25 years, retiring as a Lieutenant Colonel. I am beyond honored to be a part of MACV and our mission, working to incorporate housing for all Minnesota veterans with wrap-around services for stability.

MACV has served veterans and families experiencing or facing homelessness since 1990. We do so with a wide-reaching, comprehensive network of over 100 staff, as well as community partners throughout the state. The experience, professionalism and compassion our team shows the veterans we serve speaks to a devotion to mission. MACV's services include housing stability case management, landlord engagement, employment, healthcare navigation, legal services, permanent and transitional housing, financial management and representative payee services launched through the VA's Money Management Intervention pilot. MACV operates statewide through offices in the Twin Cities, Duluth, Saint Cloud, Moorhead, Mankato, Bemidji, and Rochester. The key to success in all our programs is the combination of individualized services each client receives with MACV's singular goal for all veterans to achieve or maintain housing stability.

MACV is proud to receive more than \$7 million in federal grants each year. Our awards include grants through the U.S. Veterans Administration (Supportive Services for Veteran Families - SSVF, Grant & Per Diem transitional and case management grants – GPD, and Legal Services for Veterans – LSV), the U.S. Department of Labor (Urban and Non-Urban Homeless Veteran Reintegration Program – HVRP), and the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (four rural Continuum of Care grants). These federal grants make up the single largest source of funding for MACV and our mission.

MACV operates 225 beds of transitional and permanent supportive housing scattered across the state. These units, including 52 in Greater Minnesota, have gradually come online through a combination of federal, state, and philanthropic partnerships. This year, we plan to open at least 11 new housing units in the Twin Cities metro, and an additional 8 in Greater Minnesota. We are excited to offer supportive housing in the Rochester area for the first time in the coming months, providing much-needed options in one of Minnesota's hardest-hit regions for lack of affordable housing.

Our staff has witnessed a significant uptick in veterans needing assistance since the end of the COVID-19 pandemic. In many rural communities, the scarcity of local support makes MACV's outreach and engagement activities even more crucial. Strategic outreach provides rural communities with a wide array of resources that empower veterans to stay ahead of crises and remain in their communities. We leverage a variety of federal, state, and philanthropic resources to address the needs of veterans affected by homelessness.

We are proud to count our partners within the VA, DOL, and HUD among our strongest allies in the fight to end veteran homelessness in Minnesota, including our rural communities.

The funds appropriated to MACV by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs are especially important to our mission's success. In 2023, MACV enrolled 937 veterans in comprehensive services in Greater Minnesota to end or prevent an episode of homelessness. This figure represents a 22% increase in the number of rural veterans served in 2021. Of those 937 individuals:

- 66% have a documented disability, including 52% with a service-related disability.
- 47% are 55 years of age or older
- 19% have minor children
- 18% identify as Veterans of Color
- 12% were female veterans
- 62% had household income below 50% Area Median Income
- 43% were below 30% Area Median Income
- 107 veterans were placed into employment

Minnesota is determined to become the fourth state in the union to achieve Functional Zero for veteran homelessness statewide by the end of 2025. The United States Interagency Council on Homelessness (USICH) has already qualified MACV and our network of statewide partners as functionally ending veteran homelessness in eight of Minnesota's 10 homeless Continuums of Care (CoC) regions, including its seven rural CoCs. While this declaration does not mean there are no veterans experiencing homelessness within these geographies, it does mean that each region has the systems and partnerships in place to ensure that veteran homelessness is rare, brief, and non-recurring.

MACV utilizes numerous tools in pursuit of achieving our mission. Resources including

Minnesota's Homeless Veteran Registry (HVR) provide a real-time snapshot of veterans experiencing homelessness anywhere in the state. The HVR allows us to keep count of those experiencing homelessness, their most recent location, the amount of time spent in homelessness, as well as other key pieces of information. As of January 5, 2024, there are 262 veterans on the HVR, including 46 veterans in rural CoCs. Program staff for the HVR partner agencies of MACV, the Minnesota Department of Veterans Affairs, and the VA homeless program teams throughout the state, discuss each veteran on the list at bi-weekly meetings. Regular case conferencing allows for the organizations best situated to serve homeless veterans to identify their needs and barriers, as well as ensure that plans for housing stability are in place and being followed. The need for this service coordination is especially high in rural areas, where resources are geographically spread out.

While each veteran experiencing homelessness has their own unique set of challenges and goals on the path to housing stability, there are also noted barriers that the rural veteran consistently faces. Some of the barriers include:

- Lack of affordable rental housing.
- Struggling to find jobs that pay a livable wage.
- Limited to no public transportation options.
- Scarcity of supportive services.
- Many communities with no emergency shelter.

The lack of affordable rental housing in rural areas has become increasingly acute as climbing rents consistently outpace income in recent years. Once-affordable housing has become

much more competitive, while the criteria for selecting rental tenants have grown narrower. In addition to having low income, many veterans on the by-name list have other barriers such as poor credit, a history of prior evictions, a need for handicapped-accessible units, or past justice involvement. These barriers lead to many veterans unable to access housing in their communities even if they can locate an affordable unit. In larger rural population hubs, such as Duluth, Rochester, and Mankato, significant student populations and specialized workforces such as professional staff for the Mayo Clinic in Rochester further reduce the number of affordable housing units available to MACV-served veterans.

The challenge experienced by veterans in finding living wage employment closely ties to a lack of public transportation in rural communities. One MACV-served veteran walked 30 miles per day to make it to work until the season changed and that was no longer an option. Veterans without reliable transportation are relegated to finding jobs within walking distance from where they are staying or moving to larger population hubs to find work or job training. As nearly half of the veterans MACV serves in rural communities are over 55, finding living wage employment that is not physically demanding is an even greater challenge in rural areas without diverse industries. To have transportation, many veterans take on the added expense of a vehicle. These vehicles are often unreliable based on what the veteran can afford. This creates additional burdens of repairs, insurance, and fuel that veterans in urban centers can avoid by relying on public transportation. High vehicle costs make it even more challenging to afford housing, leading to difficult choices of paying for housing or for their vehicle to maintain work. Far too often, the vehicles become housing themselves.

Many nonprofits, healthcare, chemical health, and mental health services are located in urban

centers. The inequity in service availability to obtain and then sustain housing stability is a challenge for rural veterans experiencing homelessness. These services help to navigate a complex web of benefits and resources and require a hands-on approach. With many veterans experiencing housing instability in rural areas having inconsistent access or proficiency with technology, make person-to-person connections more critical, and the shortage of providers more destabilizing.

In addition to the challenges of obtaining support for long-term stability, most of rural Minnesota does not have emergency shelters available for homeless community members. As a result, veterans without a place to stay must either leave their home communities to find a warm place to sleep, or survive in the Minnesota winters by sleeping in tents, in trailers with no heat or water, in vehicles, or fish houses. With a lack of shelter in the winter, if a friend or family member of a veteran lets them stay, the veteran may then lose eligibility for homeless designated housing programs and services, putting them back at square one once they are no longer able to temporarily double up.

Federal programs that benefit veterans experiencing homelessness are an incredible resource. However, many are not available to veteran households in rural areas. HUD-VASH, which provides a Section 8 voucher coupled with VA clinical case management, does not provide vouchers to many Minnesota rural geographies based on distance to VA supportive services. Where HUD-VASH can provide services, vouchers are scarcer than in urban centers. Local VA Medical Centers in Minnesota have done great work in expanding their geography to cover more communities outside of metropolitan hubs, there remains significant geography outside of the catchment for this resource. Of the 276 rural veterans on the Homeless Veteran Registry throughout 2023, over

80% were eligible for HUD-VASH, while only 11% received a voucher. In addition, VA Community Based Outreach Clinics (CBOCs) and DOL funded veteran services at American Job Centers, which are often in rural population centers, are miles from many of our most rural Minnesota veterans.

While not all federal resources are available in each rural community, as the only VA Supportive Services for Veteran Families grantee in our state, MACV is pleased with the efforts of the VA to ensure that each county in the nation is served by SSVF. Telehealth has also become a great resource for many veterans that we serve by assisting eligible individuals with access to key healthcare resources. While this has been a fantastic expansion of federal support, it is a challenge for the rural veteran experiencing homelessness to use. Many veterans with low incomes have limited or no access to reliable technology like cell phones, or access to laptops. Many veterans simply do not feel comfortable or knowledgeable enough to utilize telehealth, another perennial challenge to an otherwise helpful initiative on the part of the VA.

Specific initiatives undertaken by individual VA facilities have also improved client outcomes across Minnesota in recent years. MACV supports Fargo VA's process of opening a Community Resource and Referral Center. This center focuses on serving homeless veterans, particularly rural veterans in the Fargo/Moorhead community, and is an asset to the State. The Minneapolis VAHCS has recognized the dearth of VA presence in many of Minnesota's rural regions and expanded its HUD-VASH catchment to serve more veterans than the standard 30-mile radius around the VA campus. The Minneapolis VA has elected to include 10 public housing authorities in rural Minnesota and Wisconsin, in addition to its standard HUD-VASH catchment area. We are lucky to have such amazing partnerships with our local VA partners on the ground throughout the State. We hold these partnerships up to anyone in the country.

Minnesota is fortunate to have a State Department of Veterans Affairs with a shared mission of ending veteran homelessness through innovative practices and initiatives. Addressing the lack of affordable housing in Minnesota, the State has granted funds for housing development for veterans on the Homeless Veteran Registry with the most significant barriers to accessing housing. MACV has used this investment to strategically develop housing in Greater Minnesota. The State has also granted funds to MACV to develop a statewide housing subsidy program with clinical case management, similar to HUD-VASH, specifically targeting veterans who cannot enroll in HUD-VASH. One of the largest beneficiary groups for the subsidy, titled MNVEST, is the veteran population in rural communities that simply do not offer HUD-VASH as a subsidy program. The State has also worked to fill the gap in rural emergency shelters through the administration of a reimbursable hotel shelter program. The State also funds County and Tribal Veteran Service Officers for each county and tribal nation. We know how lucky we are that the State has stepped up to help fill gaps for resources that are not available federally.

MACV regularly reaches beyond Minnesota's traditional veteran service agencies in the course of our work. Some of our strongest local allies include County or Tribal Veteran Service Officers, who are county employees working to connect veterans to the benefits and groups which can change the trajectory of their lives. County and Tribal VSOs can assist with the MACV intake process and gather documents and signatures to speed up the time from initial contact to housing solutions. MACV has forged relationships with local American Legion and VFW posts throughout the State. Local chapters of Disabled American Veterans provided more than 7,500 free rides covering 373,000 miles to rural veterans who lack transportation options for important medical appointments in 2023. Leveraging local groups

who know the veterans in their community is a key component of our rural outreach strategy that has allowed us to achieve the benchmarks of functional zero in 85 of 87 Minnesota counties. MACV has partnered with thousands of veterans and their families in accessing the resources these individuals earned through service to our country. We understand the many strengths that rural communities have when it comes to taking care of local veterans. While MACV has offices in rural population centers, we intentionally build strong partnerships with those closest to the veterans living everywhere in Minnesota.

Federal resources, when implemented locally by the people who best know their community, are key components of Minnesota's progress in ending veteran homelessness. When we equip veterans with tools and support for their success, the resilience of this group is proven to be remarkable. The VA and their federal USICH partners have taken the initiative to lead this effort using proven methods that lift veterans and their loved ones out of homelessness and into the safety and dignity of housing suited to every veteran's needs. Expanding the availability of HUD-VASH, responsively addressing rural transportation barriers for veterans, providing access to technology, and other supportive services targeting rural veterans are simply essential to preserve the progress Minnesota has made in our smaller communities. The VA's temporary expansions for addressing the need for rideshares and cell phone provision made remarkable impacts on the wellbeing of rural veterans across our state. We hope to see these initiatives reimplemented in the future because they simply work.

Thousands of veterans MACV and our VA partners serve each year have unique stories. One veteran, whom we'll call Ryan, served our country for four years in the U.S. Coast Guard before

receiving an honorable discharge. He contacted MACV after he lost his wife. Struggling to care for himself while grieving, Ryan was hospitalized and had a partial amputation of his foot. When he was discharged, Ryan was several months behind on rent and about to lose his housing. MACV provided emergency financial assistance to get Ryan back in the black. After a family member living with Ryan was arrested, Ryan was evicted from his home. The lack of reliable transportation and communication put him out of contact with his care team for significant amounts of time. This stint of homelessness ended with Ryan being hospitalized for three months with a life-threatening infection. Following discharge from the hospital, Ryan was placed in a hotel room for emergency shelter while securing more sustainable supportive housing. Today, Ryan resides in a supportive housing unit secured by his MACV team and focuses his time and energy on applying for the benefits and programs that will improve his long-term stability. The story is one with challenges, but the outcome of Ryan living in his own apartment and having his life back as a member of the community is the result that MACV strives to give every single veteran affected by homelessness in Minnesota.

MACV has a vision for every veteran we serve to have a way to afford housing, access housing, and have the services and support needed to sustain long-term stability. We could not do this critical work without the support of our federal partners, VA, HUD, DOL, USICH, and Congress. Thank you for your past support of the key federal programs targeting veterans of the U.S. military, and consideration of future initiatives towards achieving our mission to end veteran homelessness in Minnesota and in the United States.