



Testimony of the

NATIONAL COALITION
for **HOMELESS VETERANS**

United States Senate & House of Representatives
Committees on Veterans' Affairs

"Legislative Presentation of The National Coalition for
Homeless Veterans"

March 13, 2024

Chairmen Tester & Bost, Ranking Members Moran & Takano, and distinguished Members of the 118th Congress' Joint Committees on Veterans' Affairs:

On behalf of our Board of Directors and Members across the country, thank you for the opportunity to share the views of the National Coalition for Homeless Veterans (NCHV) with you. NCHV is the resource and technical assistance center for a national network of community-based service providers and local, state, and federal agencies that provide emergency, transitional, and supportive housing, food, health services, job training and placement assistance, legal aid, and case management support for thousands of homeless, at-risk, and formerly homeless veterans each year.

We are committed to working with our network and partners across the country to end homelessness among veterans. We thank you for your leadership and continuing efforts to focus on the needs of veterans experiencing or at-risk of homelessness, as Congress put forth COVID relief legislation in the *Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act* or CARES Act, P.L. 116-136 and in Public Law 116-315, *the Johnny Isakson and David P. Roe, M.D. Veterans Health Care and Benefits Improvement Act of 2020 (Isakson/Roe)*. Critical authorities in Isakson/Roe allowed organizations across the country to keep veterans safe, decompress shelter spaces, ramp up rapid rehousing capacity, and focus on individualized housing options in hotels and motels. These bipartisan policies made dramatic impacts resulting in homeless veteran decreases of over 11% from 2021 to 2022, as the authorities Congress granted were implemented and outreach was performed nationwide.

HUD recently released 2023 Point-in-Time Count data that showed an increase of 7.4% in the veteran population experiencing homelessness. This increase from any perspective is unacceptable, as it was both foreseeable and preventable. We all knew the emergency programs had hard set sunset dates and that eviction moratoria were time limited, so they were utilized to house more veterans than in prior years. However, a continually worsening housing affordability crisis where mortgage rates and rents have skyrocketed, and the fraying of the COVID-era social safety net offset the acceleration in housing placements. While these increases are cause for alarm, we urge that both Congress and VA consider these numbers are from before the sunset of the public health emergency and the end of Isakson/Roe Section 4201 authorities, and the end of the administration's eviction prohibition moratoria. Service providers have interpreted the lack of action by Congress as a display of the branch's overall intent toward these programs and have themselves begun divesting their programs of these grants. For several years legislation that could have addressed the statutes limiting these authorities, and offered additional resources to veterans facing housing instability, has stalled unnecessarily before Congress. The best time to act upon legislation would have been before the COVID Public Health Emergency (PHE) expired on May 11, 2023, but the second-best time to act upon this legislation is now.

Despite these gaps, NCHV remains determined. Preceding the PHE veteran homelessness decreased by 54% between 2010 and 2023. The PHE impacted veterans in unprecedented ways

by increasing housing and financial instability when the PHE was lifted. Several provisions in the *Isakson/Roe* bill were tied to the PHE. With the passage of P.L. 116-315, VA had new authority to improve services across the board by providing communication, transportation, safety, and survival necessities. NCHV, VA, providers and Congress all identified the same specific program adaptations that should be kept as best practices. These enhancements should be restored at very minimal expense, for example, the *Section 4201* spending flexibility for Supportive Service for Veterans and Families (SSVF) grantees was deemed essential by VA stating, “We cannot end veteran Homelessness without these authorities.” The ability to rapidly rehouse veterans into active hotels and motels to enable VA time to place a veteran in more permanent housing has become a model that needs to be restored. VA should also allow service providers to continue to decongregate and renovate essential transitional housing capacity via capital grants. NCHV’s 2024 authorizing and FY 25 appropriations recommendations are included in this testimony as appendices A & B.

As the largest health care system in the country, VA has been in a unique position leading the way for the country in testing, treatment access, and outcomes during emergencies. The sunset of the PHE caused pervasive uncertainty among organizations serving veterans. During the emergency, transitional housing providers were finally able to request reimbursement from VA for closer to the actual cost of sheltering a veteran. When the PHE ended, this rate was cut by over 60 percent. VA has testified before these committees that lack of action has already impacted the number of providers willing to participate in programs. In the 118th congress we again have Chairman Tester’s legislation S. 1436, the *Critical Health Access Resource and Grant Extensions Act of 2023* (CHARGE Act of 2023) championing these provisions. Additional vehicles for this critical language have taken shape in the House as H.R. 491 the Return Home to Housing Act, H.R. 645 Healthy Foundations for Homeless Veterans Act, and most recently H.R. 3848 the *Housing our Military Veterans Effectively Act of 2023* (Home Act).

The National Coalition for Homeless Veterans (NCHV), and over 60 organizations urged both chambers 3 years ago to support, S. 2172, the *Building Solutions for Veterans Experiencing Homelessness Act of 2021*. NCHV has stood in staunch support of every bill and proposal that has attempted to address either access to GPD reimbursement or reinstatement of flexible authorities since they registered as best practices back in 2021. The multiple pieces of legislation before the committees would restore direly needed program improvements conceptualized in CARES and made possible in *Isakson/Roe*. With a legislative fix languishing, additional VA grantees will be forced to prioritize safety measures at a financial loss, reducing services, or discontinuing essential shelter and treatment program operations altogether. The Charge Act S.1436, its companions in the House H.R. 491 and H.R. 645, H.R. 3848 the HOME Act, and the negotiated language included in the “Senator Elizabeth Dole 21st Century Veterans Healthcare and Benefits Improvement Act,” would all provide organizations nationwide with the funding and flexibility to provide adequate services to unhoused veterans. Every veteran deserves access to safe shelter and housing, whether they are currently experiencing homelessness or are facing housing-cost burdens that put them at risk of homelessness.

We have a renewed opportunity to return to reducing veteran homelessness nationwide, even with the impacts of PHE and Eviction Moratoria sunsets yet to be fully realized. In addition to reauthorizing several homeless veteran programs expiring September 30th, 2024, there are other substantive proposals that can enhance our ability to address veteran homelessness.

Remove HPO Program Caps

While Congress' Appropriating Committees have appropriately awarded additional funding to worthy homeless veteran programs, certain authorizing caps limit the full use of available medical services funds. Grant caps were waived during the PHE but have returned as of this past May. The caps limit how much of the appropriated funds can go to direct reimbursement for veterans and services. Both the SSVF and GPD programs have these authorizing caps. NCHV recommends their removal and replacement with "as such sums" as both programs must already justify their expenses for award and reimbursement. The caps are currently only serving to limit the number of serviceable veterans and not the cost of the program, which will create even more pervasive issues starting this year.

Aging Veterans

With over 10 million veterans over the age of 55, the United States will see the 65+ population of veterans more than double by 2041. Experiencing prolonged homelessness also ages people by 10-20 years prematurely. These dramatic increases of aging veterans, and rural veteran population issues have become an important intersection in the discussion of improving services, access, and information dissemination for some of the most remote and inaccessible veterans. We must look at how programs communicate and interact with each other to ensure veterans are able to access services and supports they need.

NCHV recommends authorizing HUD-VASH with grant-making capability, to allow homeless service providers a less complex way of offering enhanced and coordinated medical, case management, transportation, and other services, particularly to elderly veterans utilizing these vouchers. NCHV supports continued investment in expanding program capabilities for this fastest growing homeless sub-population. NCHV urges Congressional support for and enactment of legislation promoting development of new subsidized housing specifically for low or no-income aging and disabled veterans, as well as prioritizing the adaptation of existing spaces across the housing continuum. Further, NCHV recommends the creation and funding for staff liaison positions to coordinate efforts to serve aging veterans across all HPO programs.

Increase HUD-VASH utilization

HUD-VASH is a targeted collaboration between the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and VA for veterans experiencing homelessness who have the greatest need for case management and supportive services to maintain permanent housing. The program supports over 80,000 active leases and has housed over 180,000 Veterans and their families since FY 2012. However, the program is unable to fully lease all 111,000 housing choice vouchers Congress has appropriated for several reasons, including case management hiring deficits, lack of affordable housing stock and the project-basing of vouchers. The program can be enhanced both through VA program eligibility adjustments, and by HUD and Treasury

adjusting their regulatory definition of income for veterans with disabilities. The veterans who need assistance the most, with the most acute disability cases, are being excluded from benefits due to their disability income. NCHV supports legislation including the *End Veteran Homelessness Act of 2024* and the draft *HPO Eligibility* bill that would finally remediate homeless veteran program eligibility discrepancies plaguing the system. NCHV also supports efforts to provide much needed upstream homeless prevention tools as requested by the Biden Harris administration in their FY 24 Presidential Budget Request.

HUD-VASH, and Tribal HUD-VASH appropriations should be made mandatory on behalf of our collective commitment to veterans and to spur additional affordable housing development. Also Increased access to Geriatric and Extended Care (GEC) services for veterans experiencing homelessness. NCHV is concerned that recent budget caps imposed by the Fiscal Responsibility Act (FRA) might result in VAMC Directors choosing to leave critical vacancies unfilled. We have started to hear from providers across the country that veterans they serve are unable to access HUD-VASH in a timely way if at all. Some are waiting months for intakes, some are being told that the VAMC is no longer taking HUD-VASH referrals, and other communities have been told the VAMC will not place vouchers there due to an inability to hire case managers. NCHV urges continued oversight of HUD-VASH and Tribal HUD-VASH to minimize impacts to VAMCs around the country. NCHV recommends promoting housing navigation staff as exemplified with HUD-VASH Enhanced Project-Based Vouchers and the hiring of additional staff at 18 facilities to enhance services at PBV sites. New home-based care models can be achieved through adaptation of programming and service provision at system point of entry such as emergency shelters, Stand Downs, and transitional housing.

Emergency & Recovery

Presented with a good number of issues at the pandemic's outset, VA and its grantees rose to the challenge. VA must continue to address veteran homelessness while anticipating increases in program scale coupled with lack of sufficient statutory relief. From report language intent, SSVF inclusion and passage of the Section 9103 of the *William M. Thornberry National Defense Authorization Act for FY 2021* (P.L. 116-283), VA has also begun program eligibility expansions for veterans with other-than-honorable (OTH) discharges. While under 9 percent of veteran discharges statuses are not Honorable, approximately 15 percent of the veterans experiencing homelessness have Under or OTH, and in some urban communities that percentage rises as high as 30 percent. The Health Care for Homeless Veterans (HCHV) program currently does not serve veterans with an "other than honorable" discharge status. Due to the importance of this program, we request that Congress expand its eligibility criteria to include veterans with OTH discharges, and Guard and Reserve members who may not have been federally-activated.

We encourage collaborative Federal efforts to identify ways to efficiently serve veterans experiencing homelessness. NCHV continues to support efforts to appropriate case management funding for VA to fully utilize HUD-VASH vouchers. Some communities purchased hotels and motels for conversion during the PHE. Additional capital funding to renovate recently acquired or dilapidated facilities, paired with project-based vouchers for operating funds could be a

mechanism to increase the availability of affordable housing more rapidly than traditional affordable housing development timelines allow. The last Housing Choice project-based voucher competition to spur development was a decade ago in 2014. There is absolutely no reason any veterans with HUD-VASH vouchers in hand should remain homeless if we can utilize all tools at our disposal to incentivize the development and/or identification of additional affordable housing stock on their behalf.

Moratoria & Foreclosures

NCHV anticipates that we have not seen the full extent of the impact of the PHE, the end of Eviction and Foreclosure Moratoria, and the sunset of Emergency Rent Assistance (ERA) funding in the 2023 PIT count data. Providers have been reporting growing wait lists for assistance in real time. The sunset of the eviction moratoria and ERA programs nationally have left veterans and others without a critical layer of protection against housing instability. NCHV supports any more toward the creation of a permanent, nationwide ERA program to prevent evictions.

Furthermore, Veterans and servicemembers with VA home loans who faced financial difficulties during the COVID-19 pandemic used forbearance to pause their mortgage payments without penalty and remain in their homes. The *Veterans Housing Stability Act of 2024*, S. 3728, would reestablish a partial claim program to help veterans and servicemembers using the VA home loan exit forbearance and get back on track with their payments and keep their homes.

Employment

Re-Employment and re-integration efforts will continue to be crucial to stability of the impacted veterans through an expanded Homeless Veteran Reintegration Program (HVRP) as it attempts to reach every veteran. Recent congressional mandates to expand HVRP to every state have fallen short due to lack of qualified entities applying. Grantees must be informed of their program awards with sufficient time to staff up, maintain staff, or transfer care of veterans and inform staff of layoffs if their grant was not re-awarded. HVRP has also suffered, for multiple years, shortfalls in their federal administration account which provides for full-time employee hires. NCHV recommends additional FTE funding earmarked for HVRP, or statutory authority to use unspent program funds on HVRP-specific FTE hires.

In Summation

Thank you for the opportunity to submit this testimony and for your continued interest in ending veteran homelessness. It is a privilege to work with all of you to ensure that every veteran facing a housing crisis has access to safe, decent, and affordable housing paired with the support services needed to remain stably housed. We are experiencing increasing numbers of veterans experiencing and at-risk of homelessness need continued safe housing now more than ever. We thank you for your attention as we work collectively to lessen the impact that rising rents and lack of access to affordable housing have on veterans experiencing or at-risk of homelessness.

Appendix A

Funding Recommendations for Fiscal Year 2025

NCHV estimates a total increase of \$175 million for homeless veteran programs in FY 2025, with the need spread across several major VA accounts listed, additionally of note were needed increases for the Veterans Justice Programs and Legal Services Grantees. Programs External to VA require a complimentary increase of \$175 million across DOL and HUD accounts. Primary non-VA programs include \$52.5 million for additional HUD-VASH incremental vouchers part of an overall \$100 million for HUD to provide new HUD-VASH voucher utilization capabilities to expand access to permanent housing to a wider swath of veterans. \$75 million for DOL's HVRP program and an additional 12 million for DOL-VETS Federal Admin account, earmarked for HVRP FTEs. The remaining VA program calculations are made based on the current 2024 VA program spending rates while we continue operating under a FY 23 Continuing Resolution. NCHV recommends continued support above current funding levels to ensure that sufficient support for housing unstable veterans is available, even as other Federal, State, and Local emergency related supports for the general population are expended.

VA

Health Care for Homeless Veterans Program (HCHV) - \$25 million increase and reauthorization for temporary housing for homeless vets to reduce social distancing, targeted outreach efforts in communities actively criminalizing homeless, and surveillance of homeless encampments.

Supportive Services for Veteran Families (SSVF) \$25 million increase to \$800 million, removal of grant cap, and reauthorization to provide flexible assistance targeted at keeping vulnerable vets in safe situations, addressing rental and other eligible arrears, and continued implementation of the shallow subsidies expansion. In 2023 alone the program helped 115,834 Veterans and their families be housed or were prevented from becoming homeless, getting veterans and their dependents off the street finding them more permanent housing. This program’s capacity must be maintained, cementing gains made in veteran homelessness during the PHE. NCHV recommends making the SSVF program permanent to increase grantee confidence and to align with other HPO programs.

Restore \$44 million to the Grant and Per Diem Program (GPD) to \$350 million, for removal of grant and reimbursement rate caps & Special Needs reauthorization to maintain system capacity and allow for additional facility renovations. This funding would also allow for additional rounds of capital grants that are needed to extend the capabilities of service providers begun during the PHE.

\$35 million increase for the Housing and Urban Development – Veterans Affairs Supportive Housing (HUD-VASH) Case Management Program for VA to provide additional VA or community contracted case managers. To increase the quality of services and increase voucher utilization and decrease case manager loads, increasing hard to fill location-based and specialty hiring incentives, as well as retention and rapport building capabilities.

HUD

\$100 million for HUD-VASH incremental funding to increase the capacity of communities to move veterans from motel/hotel placements into permanent housing.

- i. \$40 million for HUD to provide 4,500 new Project Based Vouchers, that are not counted against PHA utilization rates and caps on project-basing of vouchers.
- ii. \$52.5 million for HUD to provide for new incremental vouchers and additional Public Housing Authority incentives, to mirror the incentives offered with HUD’s Emergency Housing Vouchers.
- iii. 7.5 million for Tribal HUD-VASH

DOL

\$7.5 million increase to \$75 million for DOL’s Homeless Veteran Reintegration Program (HVRP) aimed at expanding available assistance for at-risk veterans due to job loss. The program intends to continue expanding access nationwide and include spouses and dependents. HUD Data indicates positive effects on program metrics for programs paired with HVRP grants as there are savings in administrative costs between programs with a single grantee.

NCHV appreciates every dollar Congress has allocated to ending veteran homelessness and we also recognize the need to fund these obvious program improvements for the next year and beyond. Our collective mission is to not only reduce, but end veteran homelessness finally.

Appendix B

Supported Legislation

S. 1436 - Critical Health Access Resource and Grant Extensions Act of 2023 (CHARGE Act)

NCHV **fully supports** the CHARGE Act of 2023. This critical legislation makes necessary program adjustments to better accommodate homeless veterans with difficulties accessing services, as requested by *both* VA and service providers. This duly considered and carefully crafted language would again allow VA transportation, communication and purchasing authorities providing veterans access to care, communication with case management, and stable housing supports. The bill would also adjust access to reimbursement for transitional housing providers with veterans actively in their care. Emphasizing continuous improvement, the bill includes an assessment of remaining barriers to securing permanent housing and longer-term program reporting to refine veteran housing outcomes. NCHV urges the Senate's consideration and passage of this legislation's more comprehensive language without delay.

H.R. 491 - Return Home to Housing Act

NCHV **supports** this legislation that resumes Grant and Per Diem (GPD) Program reimbursement rate flexibility at 200% the state home domiciliary rate of \$59.69, or \$119.38 a night for shelter, food, security, staff, and provision of all supportive services. Funding for this program goes directly to veteran services as it is reimbursed for supports already provided to a veteran in need of housing. This bill is a House companion of the GPD language included in the Senate's Charge Act.

H.R. 645 - Healthy Foundations for Homeless Veterans Act

NCHV **supports** this legislation which restores lapsed VA communications, transportation, and spending authorities. VA will once again be able to get veterans to and from their medical appointments back to their housing, facilities, or unsheltered locations rather than letting veterans navigate major thoroughfares at high risk to themselves and or days of travel by foot in both rural and urban settings without mass transportation. The legislation has the added benefit of drastically reducing missed VA medical appointments or case management losing contact with unsheltered veterans. This bill is a House companion of the flexible VA authority language included in the Senate's Charge Act.

H.R. 3848 - Housing our Military Veterans Effectively Act of 2023 (Home Act) (Passed House)

NCHV **supports** this legislation. The bill would adjust the cap on reimbursement for transitionally housing veterans at 133% of the state home domiciliary rate. There would also be a waiver available for up to 50% of the providers for up to 200% of the state home domiciliary rate. More simply the rate would go from \$68.64 to just over \$79.38 for the next three years.

This bill, like S. 1436 in the Senate, also includes language restoring the lost SSVF spending authorities but only for a one-year extension.

H.R. 2525 - Health Care for Homeless Veterans Act

NCHV **supports** this legislation. The bill extends the HCHV program through 2029 and provides that under the HCHV program, *a veteran* means a person who served in the active military, naval, air, or space service and was discharged or released from service, excluding those who received a dishonorable discharge or were discharged or dismissed under a general court-martial.

S. 3728 - Veterans Housing Stability Act of 2024

NCHV **supports** this legislation. Veteran mortgage delinquencies were not forgiven during the PHE but were placed in forbearance. the PHE lapsed and those bills came due or refinance into much higher rates. While VA is working to provide release valve without statutory relief from Congress, options are severely limited for veteran borrowers who took on high interest loans. This bill would halt veteran foreclosures through a partial claim program.

HR 3900 - To establish certain rights for spouses of members of the uniformed services

NCHV **supports** granting employment and reemployment rights to spouses of service members, which helps them maintain income through the curveballs of military life (deployments, moves, and mobilizations) thrown at military families. Dual incomes are seen as a protective factor for military families when service members are in transition.

H.R. 6225 - Expanding Home Loans for Guard and Reservists Act

NCHV **supports** expansion of grants eligibility for the VA Home Loan program to Reserve component service members who serve 30 consecutive days of active duty for training that is not basic training. This effectively allows Guard/Reservists to become eligible for the VA Home Loan program as they are in their military occupation specialty training after basic training.

HR 5416 - Ensuring Veterans' Smooth Transition Act

NCHV supports automatically enrolling transitioning service members into VA healthcare to ease the transition process and ensure continuity of care considering that service members are allowed to opt-out.

Veteran Package - Senator Elizabeth Dole 21st Century Veterans Healthcare and Benefits Improvement Act

NCHV **supports** the inclusion of language from the Senate's CHARGE Act and the House's Home Act in any final legislation. Final bill text has yet to be released and CBO scores have only

recently been received by the joint committees. The VSO community has been heavily invested in the passage of this package of veteran supports and priorities from the outset of the 118th Congress and NCHV urges consideration without further delay.

HUD-VASH Update - End Veteran Homelessness Act of 2024

NCHV **supports** this legislation which would carefully shift the onus of case management from the veteran to VA. The bill would allow VA to extend HUD-VASH voucher access beyond the chronically homeless and the most acutely disabled, to all *homeless* veterans and those *at risk* of homelessness, or that are already participating in other rental assistance programs. The language carefully maintains priorities for the original sub-populations to maintain veteran access to case management. The bill would increase access to, and utilization of HUD-VASH vouchers. NCHV urges swift consideration of this legislation along with additional incremental funding in 2025 to cover these intended expansions.

Draft Bill - *Homeless_Eligibility*

NCHV **supports** this language which Would standardize eligibility for VA homeless programs and would add veterans of the Military's Reserve Components as eligible for homeless services. Programs have naturally evolved and expanded independently in different Congresses, causing a patchwork of eligibility regulations and rules for accessing support. This language could ameliorate several cross program and even departmental statutory and regulatory eligibility incongruities causing artificial barriers to access for veterans in need.

Draft Bill - *HOMELESS_PROGRAMS_xml* – Guard/Reserve VA Homelessness Program Eligibility

NCHV **supports** this legislation which fixes issues that have arisen between homeless programs for the Guard and Reserve components when eligibility was expanded for veterans with Other Than Honorable discharge statuses.

Draft Bill - *Veteran Rental Assistance Guarantee*

NCHV **supports** this language which would guarantee all veterans a one-time upstream rental assistance of up to \$4,000 for first and month's rent, back rent, landlord incentives, or lease-up fees, paired with a longer-term housing voucher. The language was intended to realize the Biden-Harris Administration's 2024 Budget Request of a multi-billion-dollar upstream homeless prevention proposal for homeless veterans and those at risk of homelessness. The language also prohibits discrimination against the source of the funds while also barring veteran disability from being included in eligibility calculations.

Draft Bill - *BNA_vets_xml* - Basic Need Allowance/Hunger bill

NCHV **supports** the provision for basic needs if service members are receiving the Basic Need Allowance the month before transition, the Services will continue to pay it to service members/veterans the 6 months after transition.

Draft Bill - *PORTCA_167_xml* - Setting the Table for Transition Act of 2023

NCHV **supports** granting SNAP eligibility for all service members for 100 days post transition to reduce food insecurity in transitioning veterans.