

Statement Of James Zenner

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Department of Military and Veterans Affairs

County of Los Angeles

U.S. House Of Representatives

Committee On Veterans' Affairs

**“Expanding The Mission: The Future of The National Center For Warrior
Independence in West LA”**

May 13, 2026

Introduction

Chairman Bost, Ranking Member Takano, and members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today regarding the development of the National Center for Warrior Independence at the West Los Angeles VA Campus in Brentwood. My name is Jim Zenner, and I am the Director of the Los Angeles County Department of Military and Veterans Affairs, as well as the County Veterans Service Officer.

Priorities for the National Center for Warrior Independence

President Trump's May 2025 Executive Order sets an ambitious target of housing up to 6,000 veterans by January 2028. It envisions bold action so homeless veterans can access the comprehensive care, housing, and substance use treatment required to restore their independence. We are seeing some headway with the VA's termination of non-veteran leases and the clearing of land. However, that is only an initial step in the goal to address the entrenched cycle of homelessness, untreated trauma, and the related illicit activities that threaten to undermine the Center's success before it begins.

To fully realize the vision of the National Center for Warrior Independence and to deliver on the Executive Order's directives for self-sufficiency and restored lives, I urge the committee to prioritize three specific actions. First, the immediate establishment of a federal Veterans Treatment Court on campus. Second, a substantial expansion of affordable housing units, combined with critical flexibility in project-based housing programs. Third, a comprehensive review and resolution of the jurisdictional gaps impacting the campus, including exploring why VA Police Department officers are not allowed to be deputized by local law enforcement agencies. Addressing these foundational issues is an absolute necessity.

Establishing an On-Campus Federal Veterans Treatment Court

This is where a dedicated, on-campus federal Veterans Treatment Court becomes essential. Justice-involved veterans near the campus grapple with PTSD, traumatic brain injury, substance use disorders, and other invisible

wounds stemming from their military service. These conditions contribute to non-violent offenses. Without mandated treatment and structured accountability, we are simply cycling veterans through the justice system without addressing the root causes.

If a federal treatment court is implemented on the campus, my team will collaborate closely with the VA to ensure it has our full, unwavering support. This court could be a critical link to ensure veterans whose actions are tied to untreated behavioral health issues receive care, not just consequences. Instead of repeated incarceration, participants would be mandated into integrated mental health services, substance abuse programs, and veteran mentorship. Upon successful completion, marked by objective milestones, charges could be reduced or dismissed. Nationwide, this model works: it reduces recidivism, improves housing outcomes, and significantly enhances public safety.

Expanding Flexible and Diverse Housing Solutions

Building on that stability requires a deeply collaborative approach to housing. In Los Angeles County, we have witnessed the profound impact of the County, the VA, and local service providers working closely together. Through our "OneTeam" initiative, we bring stakeholders to the same table at the same time. Through the barrier-busting work conducted by OneTeam, we have learned that veterans experiencing homelessness are not a monolithic group. They present with complex circumstances that do not seamlessly fit into the rigid scope of our current eligibility rules.

Achieving the President's vision requires not just new facilities, but flexible solutions. We need a waiver so HUD-VASH project-based vouchers are not counted toward the cap with local Public Housing Authorities. This waiver is necessary to provide a pathway for local public housing authorities who are nearing their cap to continue project-basing their VASH vouchers on the WLA VA campus for new buildings that will come online in future years.

Furthermore, we must allow veterans at risk of homelessness to qualify for project-based units. If we concentrate our most marginalized and highest-acuity veterans in one location, we risk creating a place where veterans are merely surviving their trauma rather than recovering and moving forward. To build a resilient community, we need to surround our most vulnerable with the varied life experiences of their peers. To achieve this, we need a diverse portfolio of housing. This must include workforce housing for the hundreds of veterans employed on the campus, alongside transitional housing for recently separated service members and student veterans.

Addressing Jurisdictional Gaps and Campus Security

Finally, we must confront the jurisdictional issues that are impeding campus operations. As veterans, we are entirely too familiar with the bureaucratic runaround and the frustration of being told our issues are not the responsibility of a specific jurisdiction. This passing of the buck represents a lack of accountability and leaves critical gaps in service and safety.

This problem is aggravated by staffing shortages within the campus VA Police Department. VAPD is saddled with uncompetitive GS positions that hinder their ability to recruit and retain officers. The downstream effects are precarious: alarmingly low patrol coverage, delayed response times, and a diminished law enforcement presence. I have worked to assist the local VAPD in navigating these jurisdictional hurdles, including a recent case supporting them with a deceased veteran on the campus, and these interactions have exposed systemic voids.

Currently, VA-imposed regulations prohibit VA police officers from being deputized by local agencies to enforce state or local laws on VA property. This policy has inadvertently created jurisdictional dead zones that compromise public safety for everyone on campus.

Conclusion

Congress should further review these jurisdictional issues to identify opportunities to address lapses in jurisdictional rights. At a minimum,

veterans accessing the campus have earned the right to a safe, supportive environment in which to get treatment.

Establishing the Veterans Treatment Court, expanding flexible housing options, and resolving these chronic security shortfalls are not just policy tweaks. They are the fundamental actions required to honor the campus's original 1888 mission, fulfill the Executive Order's vision, and help veterans reclaim their independence.

Thank you for your time. I welcome your questions.