

**STATEMENT FOR THE RECORD
OF
THE AMERICAN LEGION
FOR A JOINT HEARING OF THE
SUBCOMMITTEES ON HEALTH
AND
ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
ON
VA, HUD, AND DOL EFFORTS TO REDUCE VETERAN HOMELESSNESS**

JANUARY 18, 2018

Chairmen Wenstrup and Arrington, Ranking Members Brownley and O'Rourke and distinguished Members of the Subcommittees, on behalf of National Commander Denise H. Rohan and the 2 million members of The American Legion, we thank you and your colleagues for the work you do in support of our servicemembers and veterans as well as their families. The American Legion is our nation's largest patriotic and service organization for veterans, serving every man and woman who has worn the uniform for this country.

We thank you especially for holding this hearing to assess the various programs the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), Housing and Urban Development (HUD), and Department of Labor (DOL) use to provide homeless and at-risk veterans with housing, healthcare, supportive services, and job training, search, and placement assistance.

BACKGROUND

Generally, the causes of homelessness can be grouped into three categories: economic hardships, health issues, and lack of affordable housing. Although these issues affect all homeless individuals, veterans face additional challenges in overcoming these obstacles, including: prolonged separation from traditional support systems such as family and close friends; highly stressful training and occupational demands, which can affect personality, self-esteem and the ability to communicate upon discharge; and non-transferability of some military occupational specialties into the civilian workplace. Research indicates that those who served in the late Vietnam and post-Vietnam eras are at greatest risk of becoming homeless, but that veterans from more recent wars and conflicts are also affected.¹ Veterans returning from deployments in Afghanistan and Iraq often face invisible wounds of war, including traumatic brain injury and post-traumatic stress disorder, both of which correlate with homelessness.

¹ <https://endhomelessness.org/homelessness-in-america/who-experiences-homelessness/veterans/>

VA and HUD reported a little over 40,000 homeless veterans on a single night in January 2017 (2017 Annual Homeless Assessment Report to Congress).² VA has taken decisive action toward its goal of ending homelessness among our nation's veterans. To achieve this goal, VA has developed a plan to assist every homeless veteran willing to accept services retain or acquire: safe housing; needed treatment services; opportunities to retain or return to employment; and benefits assistance. Also, VA has implemented a prevention initiative - the Supportive Services for Veterans and Families (SSVF), which is VA's primary prevention program designed to help veterans and their families rapidly exit homelessness, or avoid entering homelessness.

Since 2014, more than 880 mayors, governors, and other state and local officials have answered the call of the Mayors Challenge to End Veteran Homelessness, pledging to do all they can to ensure their communities succeed. And it's working. A growing list of 57 communities, including the entire states of Connecticut, Delaware, and Virginia, have proven that ending veteran homelessness is possible and sustainable.³ As documented through federal criteria and benchmarks, urban, suburban, and rural communities across 26 different states have proven that they can drive down the number of veterans experiencing homelessness to as close to zero as possible, while also building and sustaining systems that can effectively and efficiently address veterans' housing crises in the future.⁴

The national data expresses the same picture of remarkable progress. Thanks to unwavering commitment and partnership at the federal, state and local levels, stakeholders and advocates have seen veteran homelessness reduced by 45 percent in this country between 2009 and 2017.⁵ Progress has been driven by urgent action at all levels of government and across all sectors. Federal agencies have engaged in unprecedented coordination and shared responsibility. Congress has expanded investments into federal programs, such as the HUD-VA Supportive Housing (HUD-VASH) program and the Supportive Services for Veteran Families (SSVF) program, which provide a range of housing and service interventions. State and local entities and the philanthropic community have aligned investments with federal resources. Communities have formed stronger relationships to deploy those resources through best practices, including coordinated entry and Housing First approaches. Also, governors, mayors, and other public officials have mobilized their communities in support of a clear and ambitious goal to prevent and end veteran homelessness.

Another critical federal program in the fight to eliminate veteran homelessness is the Homeless Veterans Reintegration Program (HVRP) within the Department of Labor's Veterans' Employment and Training Services (DOL-VETS). HVRP is the most effective program available to address homeless veterans' financial issues by helping them obtain gainful employment. HVRP grantees use a case management approach to assist homeless veterans, and provide critical linkages for a variety of support services available in their local communities. The

² https://www.hud.gov/press/press_releases_media_advisories/2017/HUDNo_17-109

³ <https://www.usich.gov/goals/veterans>

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/blog/2016/11/14/together-we-can-end-veteran-homelessness>

program is employment focused; veterans receive the employment and training services they need in order to re-enter the labor force. Direct services include placement in employment, skills training, job development, career counseling, and resume writing. Support services such as clothing, provision of or referral to temporary, transitional, and permanent housing, referral to medical substance abuse treatment, and transportation assistance are also available.

In 2016, VA awarded \$300 million via 275 individual SSVF grants to non-profit organizations in all 50 states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, Guam, and the Virgin Islands. The VA's SSVF grantees cover 400 of the 416 Continuums of Care across the country.⁶ Through FY 2015, more than 157,000 homeless and at-risk veterans and their families were served with these funds. Additionally, in 2015, 55,669 veterans served in the SSVF Program exited to permanent housing outcomes. Over the course of the program's lifetime, 78 percent of all participants have exited to permanent housing.⁷

Lastly, through FY 2017, HUD has awarded approximately 93,000 HUD-VASH vouchers.⁸ Nationwide, more than 300 Public Housing Authorities (PHAs) have participated in the program. Recently, Congress made permanent a set-aside program to encourage HUD-VASH vouchers to be used on tribal lands, thereby filling an important gap in our service delivery system. HUD-VASH, SSVF and HVRP are very vital programs in the quest to combat and ultimately end veteran homelessness. Data has proven their quality and effectiveness.

The American Legion urges Congress and the VA to continue to adequately fund/prioritize these programs that have been game changers to at-risk and homeless veterans. The American Legion will not rest until we see continued efforts in getting veterans off the streets and into affordable and safe housing as well as support services they need in order to sustain their healthy independent living.

DEFINITION OF HOMELESS PROGRAMS:

1. The HUD-VASH program combines Housing Choice Voucher (HCV) rental assistance for Veterans experiencing homelessness provided by HUD with case management and clinical services provided by VA. At the local level, the HUD-VASH program operates as a collaborative effort between VA Medical Centers (VAMCs) and local Public Housing Agencies (PHAs). The VAMC identifies Veterans who are eligible for the program and refers them to the PHA to receive a HUD-VASH voucher. The PHA provides the rental subsidy, and the VAMC provides case management and clinical services.

⁶ HUD's Continuum of Care (CoC) Program is designed to promote community-wide commitment to the goal of ending homelessness; provide funding for efforts by nonprofit providers, and State and local governments to quickly rehouse homeless individuals and families while minimizing the trauma and dislocation caused to homeless individuals, families, and communities by homelessness; promote access to and effect utilization of mainstream programs by homeless individuals and families; and optimize self-sufficiency among individuals and families experiencing homelessness.

⁷ http://www.nchv.org/images/uploads/NCHV_Policy_Statement_SSVF_2017.pdf

⁸ http://www.nchv.org/images/uploads/NCHV_Policy_Statement_HUD-VASH_2017c.pdf

2. The Supportive Services for Veteran Families (SSVF) Program, administered by the Department of Veterans Affairs, is the only national, veteran-specific program available to help at-risk men and women veterans from ever becoming homeless. The program is also the most suitable resource for homeless veterans who are able to quickly transition out of homelessness into permanent housing. SSVF grantees are nonprofit, community-based organizations that provide very low-income veterans and their families with services in the following areas: health, legal, child care, transportation, fiduciary and payee, daily living, obtaining benefits, and housing counseling. The program also allows for time-limited payments to third parties – e.g. landlords, utility companies, moving companies, and licensed child-care providers – to ensure housing stability for veteran families. SSVF funds are leveraged with local Continuums of Care and other community partners at no extra cost to the federal government.
3. Administered by DOL-VETS for over two decades, HVRP served approximately 17,000 veterans in 2016, with a national placement rate into employment of 68.4 percent. These men and women find employment at an average cost to the program of \$2,007 per placement. Both the placement rate and the cost per placement represent improvements over the last several years. Please note – HVRP is the only nationwide program focused on assisting homeless veterans to reintegrate into the workforce. This program is a highly successful grant program that needs to be fully funded at \$50 million. Currently, HVRP is funded at \$45 million.

HOMELESS DATA (2017 Annual Homeless Assessment Report [AHAR] to Congress):

- 40,056 veterans are experiencing homelessness in the U.S.
- Three in five homeless veterans (62% or 24,690 veterans) were staying in emergency shelters or transitional housing programs, while two in five (38% or 15,366 veterans) were found in places not suitable for human habitation
- Almost all veterans were experiencing homelessness in households without children (98% or 39,101 veterans). About two percent (955) were veterans who were homeless as part of a family
- The number of homeless veterans increased by 585 people between 2016 and 2017. This increase was driven entirely by an 18 percent increase in the number of veterans experiencing homelessness in unsheltered places (2,299 more veterans). Partly offsetting the increase in unsheltered veterans, the number of sheltered veterans decreased by 1,714 people (or 7%).
- Increases among veterans experiencing homelessness were due entirely to increases among veterans in households without children. The number of veterans in families declined overall (by 16%), among sheltered veterans (by 11%) and unsheltered veterans (by 29%).
- Since 2009, veteran homelessness has dropped considerably, with 45 percent (or 33,311) fewer veterans experiencing homelessness in 2017 than in 2009.
- Just under 30 percent of all veterans experiencing homelessness were in California (29% or 11,472 veterans).
- In three states, more than half of all veterans experiencing homelessness were unsheltered. Those states were: California (67%), Hawaii (62%), and Oregon (53%).

- More than 1.4 million American veterans live in poverty and are more vulnerable to becoming homeless than their civilian counterparts. VA research shows that one in 10 veterans living in poverty is likely to experience homelessness.

PREVENTION: The American Legion assists veterans and their families with:

- Disability claims and healthcare benefits
- Interview & Resume Workshops
- Branding & Networking Sessions
- Job Fairs
- Small Business Development Workshops
- Credentialing Roundtables and Summits
- Advocacy at Local, State and National Levels

EXAMPLE OF LEGION'S ASSISTANCE

During The American Legion's 2017 Washington Conference, we went on a site visit and received a briefing from U.S.VETS about their programs and services. U.S.VETS is the nation's largest nonprofit provider of comprehensive services to at-risk and homeless veterans. In addition, we had conversations with several veterans about the program and how helpful it has been in assisting them with becoming more independent and hopeful for the future. The American Legion's Operation Comfort Warriors Program donated \$4,800 worth of comfort items and necessities to the U.S.VETS facility during the tour. The in-kind donation was well received by U.S.VETS.

CONCLUSION

Due to our work with homeless veterans and their families, The American Legion understands that homeless veterans need a sustained, coordinated effort that provides secure housing and nutritious meals; essential physical healthcare, substance abuse aftercare and mental health counseling; as well as personal development and empowerment. Veterans also need job assessment, training and placement assistance. The American Legion believes all programs to assist homeless veterans must focus on helping veterans reach their highest level of self-management.

The American Legion will continue to place special priority on the issue of veteran homelessness, and we call on Congress and the VA to do the same. With veterans making up approximately 10 percent of our nation's total adult homeless population, there is plenty of reason to give the cause special attention.⁹ Along with various community partners, The American Legion remains committed to seeing VA's goal of ending veteran homelessness come to fruition. Our goal is to ensure that every community across America has programs and services in place to get homeless veterans in the housing (along with necessary

⁹ <https://www.legion.org/homelessveterans/taskforce>

healthcare/treatment) while connecting those at-risk veterans with the local services and resources they need.

The American Legion applauds Congress for its substantial funding for homeless programs, while giving major thanks to VA, HUD, and DOL, for its implementation of these programs that have literally saved the lives of thousands of veterans. We strongly believe that with the path VA has taken in eliminating veteran homelessness, and the proper utilization of the resources at the state level and in local communities, we can continue to make tremendous progress.

The American Legion thanks the subcommittees for holding this important hearing and for the opportunity to explain the views of the 2 million veteran members of this organization. For additional information regarding this testimony, please contact Mr. Jeff Steele, Assistant Director of The American Legion's Legislative Division at (202) 861-2700 or jsteele@legion.org.