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## Congressional Testimony Written Statement

From: Kimberly M. Mitchell, President and CEO Veterans Village of San Diego

Veterans Village of San Diego (VVSD) is a nationally recognized non-profit that has served veterans since 1981. We are the primary San Diego non-profit in providing housing and services for homeless veterans and supportive services to veterans and their families. For over 3 decades, VVSD has focused on housing and serving veterans in need, especially veterans who struggle with homelessness, addiction, mental health issues, war trauma, and long-term unemployment.

VVSD operates over 500 beds for homeless veterans and their families throughout San Diego County. In addition, we currently operate hundreds of emergency and transitional beds for homeless veterans. Later this year, we will open a brand new permanent supportive housing apartment complex with 54 units of 1, 2, and 3 bedroom apartments where low income, homeless veterans and their families will have a place to live with access to the comprehensive programs and resources they need.

In our residential treatment programs, VVSD assists veterans who have substance use and mental health issues, which includes men and women of all generations from Vietnam through the current conflicts. Working with alcohol and drug case managers and mental health professionals, our clients have the opportunity to rebuild their lives, repair relationships and return to the community as productive citizens.

### **HOW VVSD VIEWS OUR PARTNERSHIPS WITH THE VA, HUD & DOL**

With excellent financial and moral support from DOL, VA, and HUD, VVSD programs have turned around and even saved the lives of thousands of homeless veterans. In 2017 VVSD's Veteran Employment Programs funded by DOL/HVRP, the California Employment Development Department, Walmart, and USAA placed over 300 homeless veterans into a variety of full-time meaningful employment positions with an average starting wage exceeding \$14 per hour. Another example of VVSD's success is that our VA Rapid Rehousing program. Known as the VA Supportive Services to Veterans Families (SSVF) Program, Rapid Rehousing has placed and served over 1544 veterans (250 households with children) since 2013, and has prevented homelessness to over 135 households with children. Our SSVF Program not only placed these veterans into permanent supportive housing but also assisted them secure income from a job or benefits programs. We continue to work with many of these veterans on the issues most important to them ranging from family budgeting, to trauma assistance, to securing a job or obtaining

Founders of STAND DOWN for Homeless Veterans

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Veterans' Benefits. Without these excellent programs, hundreds, perhaps thousands, more homeless veterans would live on the streets of San Diego, in their vehicles, under bridges, or in canyons.

As valuable as these federal programs are to San Diego's homeless veterans and to VVSD, San Diego continues to have major homeless challenges. Even though San Diego County is the 17<sup>th</sup> largest region in the U.S., we have the third highest number of homeless veterans; over 2,000 in the course of a year. Veterans are not the only people who are homeless in San Diego, but last January, the annual count discovered over 9000 homeless people in San Diego County, of which over 5,600 are unsheltered homeless. Some of the reasons why our region has a high population of homeless people and homeless veterans include the following:

1) San Diego has an enormous shortage of affordable housing. As a result, many landlords are reluctant to accept veterans and other low income people subsidized by SSVF, HUD-VASH, Section 8 and similar programs. Our public housing has a waiting list of many years. Locally, the City of San Diego pays double security deposits to landlords to accept rapid re-housing veterans. We believe this is a great idea that could be followed by the federal government.

2) Many federal housing programs minimize the scourge of drug use and how much it directly contributes to homelessness and deaths in San Diego and across the country. San Diego continues to be the methamphetamine capital of America. In 2016, 377 San Diego deaths were linked to Methamphetamine, 66 more than the prior year. Last year 47% of all meth seizures on the U.S. border were in San Diego County according to the DEA and U.S. Customs and Border Protection. 56% of adults booked into county jails tested positive for the drug last year compared to 49% in 2015.

VVSD recognizes that there are many homeless veterans who do not have substance use or mental health problems. The "Housing First" model, which has assisted in placing many of our clients into much needed permanent supportive housing, may overlook the direct connection between homelessness, drug use, war trauma or mental health issues. VVSD believes that the "Housing First" model is a great solution for some, but not the only solution for all of our homeless veterans. VVSD's experience and third party data indicate to us that over 50% of all homeless veterans struggle with substance use. Similarly, a comprehensive Army study of nearly 500,000 soldiers and veterans from the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars concluded that repeated deployments and the effects of combat were the top reasons why 47% of these combat veterans suffered from Post-Traumatic Stress (PTS). At VVSD's residential treatment center for homeless veterans, our Mental Health Clinicians work with over 2/3 of these homeless veterans who struggle with both substance use disorder and PTS or other traumatic conditions. These challenges have multiple causes but are often based on a combination of living on the street, prior physical, sexual or emotional abuse in the family or the military, and the effects of military combat. **In our view, it's critically important for government programs to be allowed and continue to fund these underlying causes of veteran homelessness.**

VVSD believes the HUD-VASH Program is a valuable service for many homeless veterans. However, the VA Case Management ratio is often too high with 35-40 veterans for each VA Social Worker. Since these veterans usually live in different areas of a sprawling San Diego region, we think a better and more effective case management ratio for VASH would be 1:20.

Finally, San Diego needs more homeless prevention services. If the VA, DOL, and HUD were to fund outpatient veteran service clinics that prevent homelessness, it would be a wonderful use of government funds and would be far less costly than treating veterans after they become homeless or end up in prison. These veteran service centers ideally would have a variety of services including mental health and substance use treatment, providing individual, group and family therapy, and recovery support groups, similar to the Alcoholics Anonymous 12-step model. These centers would also provide job search assistance and a social support system where veterans have the opportunity to socialize and support each other as they face the challenges of reintegrating into the civilian world, post-military. Veterans have a special connection to other veterans and once discharged from the service, they strive to reestablish that connection, and these veteran service centers would be a great resource for them.

Respectfully,

Kimberly M. Mitchell  
President & CEO