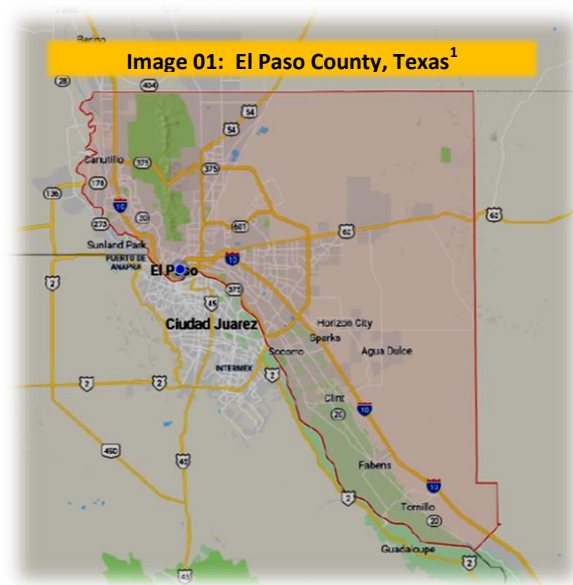


First and foremost, we thank the members of the U.S. House of Representatives, and more specifically the Committee on Veteran’s Affairs Subcommittee on Health and the Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity for the invitation to the Opportunity Center for the Homeless to testify at the hearing scheduled for Thursday, January 18, 2018. In presenting our testimony, we would like to preface our comments as those of a provider, with a “boots on the ground” mentality. We further represent that our comments, both within this written statement and in our testimony, represent those of an organization that has been in operation for 24 contiguous years - an organization that was founded on and continues to operate on the principle of “Recovery through Service”. A majority of our staff has a lived experience with homelessness and thereby understands the realities that those that are homeless face.

In preparation for this hearing, we met with several community service providers to ensure that the comments noted herein are reflective of the community, and not that of a single organization. In so doing it is important to first understand the context in which these statements are being made through a brief introduction of the community, its primary source of funding, and a picture of veteran homelessness in El Paso.



### Background

El Paso County is home to over 837,000<sup>1</sup> residents. It occupies over 1,000 square miles at the farthest west tip of Texas, bordering both New Mexico and Ciudad Juarez, Chihuahua, Mexico. The City of El Paso is the sixth largest in Texas, and the largest Texas border community.

Income in El Paso County is significantly lower than the rest of the state. A little over 22% of El Paso County residents live below 100% of the Federal Poverty Level (FPL). A little over half of El Paso County residents live below 200% of FPL.<sup>2</sup>

There are a total of 40 programs/agencies that provide housing (emergency shelter, transitional, and permanent housing) to the homeless within our community--that based on the most recent point-in-time count (conducted January 26, 2017) provided housing to 1,242 individuals<sup>3</sup>. The Opportunity Center is the primary provider of services to the

<sup>1</sup> United States Census Bureau, Quick Facts, El Paso County, Texas – Population Estimates 07/01/2017

<sup>2</sup> United States Census Bureau, Community Facts, El Paso County, Texas

<sup>3</sup> Adjusted Point in Time based on reported occupancy within the Opportunity Center for the Homeless.

homeless as illustrated through the point-in-time results that reflect that the Opportunity Center housed 30% of the total homeless population, within our community, on that evening and 53% of the single adult homeless population. The Opportunity Center is a no-barrier shelter, allowing all to access services.

The City of El Paso is solely reliant on funding received through the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) through Continuum of Care Funds (primary), Emergency Shelter Grant (secondary), and the Community Development Block Grant (tertiary). The primary and secondary funding streams have been and continue to be aligned with the federal objectives, as delineated within Opening Doors: Federal Strategic Plan to Prevent and End Homelessness (amended 2015), generally referred to as Housing First. The City and County of El Paso currently provides no funding to supplement the referenced sources.

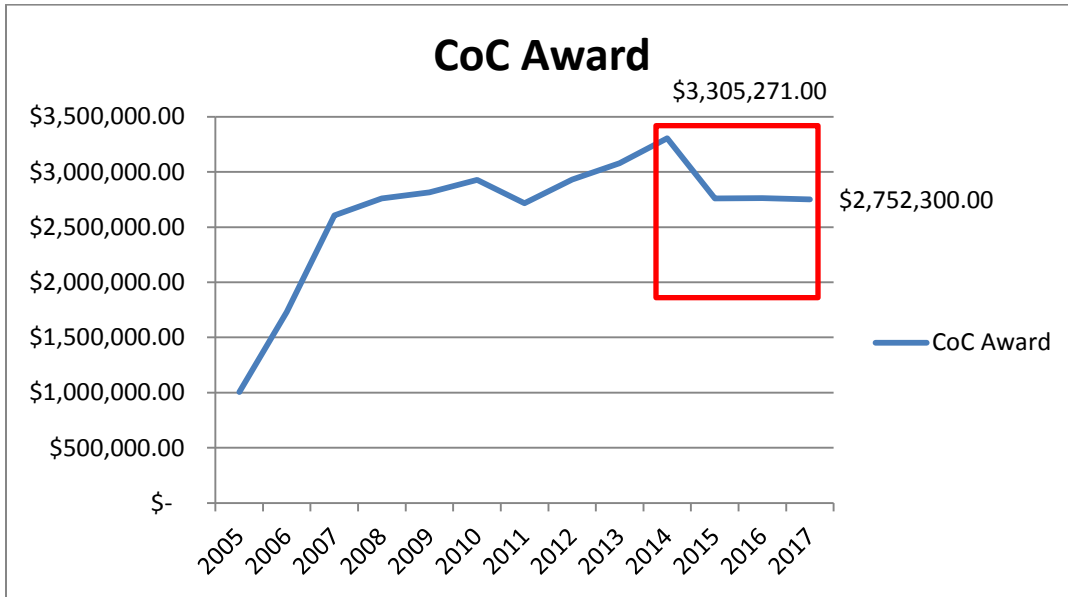
The re-alignment of public funding in line with the federal strategic plan has significantly curtailed and/or eliminated resources within El Paso for the homeless. This directly impacts the efficacy of the Continuum of Care as it relates to those that are homeless, to include the veteran homeless population.

### **Organizational Summary**

The Opportunity Center for the Homeless (OC), coming to the close of its 24th year of operation, consists of: two homeless resource centers - one for single adult men, one for single adult women; one emergency shelter for families; and eight residential programs for the chronically homeless, elderly, disabled, single women, mentally ill, veterans, and men and women in school/work programs. The veterans program is a transitional living center, the balance is permanent housing.

### **Community Funding**

Funding received through HUD, and more specifically the Continuum of Care (CoC) is the primary funding stream for our community. The chart on the following page tracks community CoC funding from 2005 forward.



Key points include:

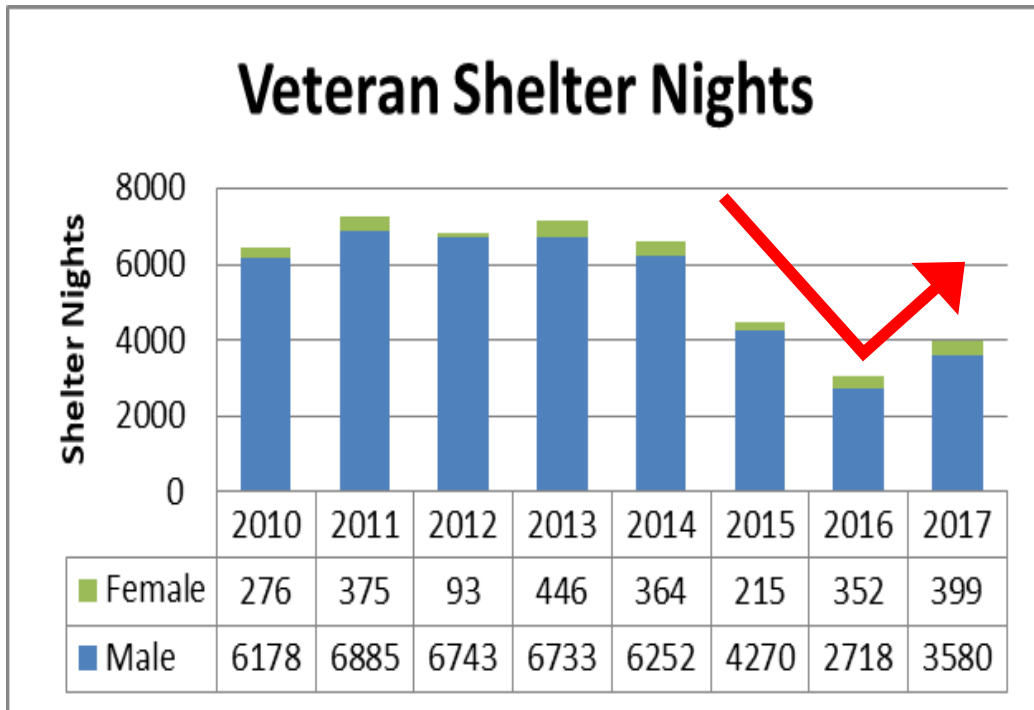
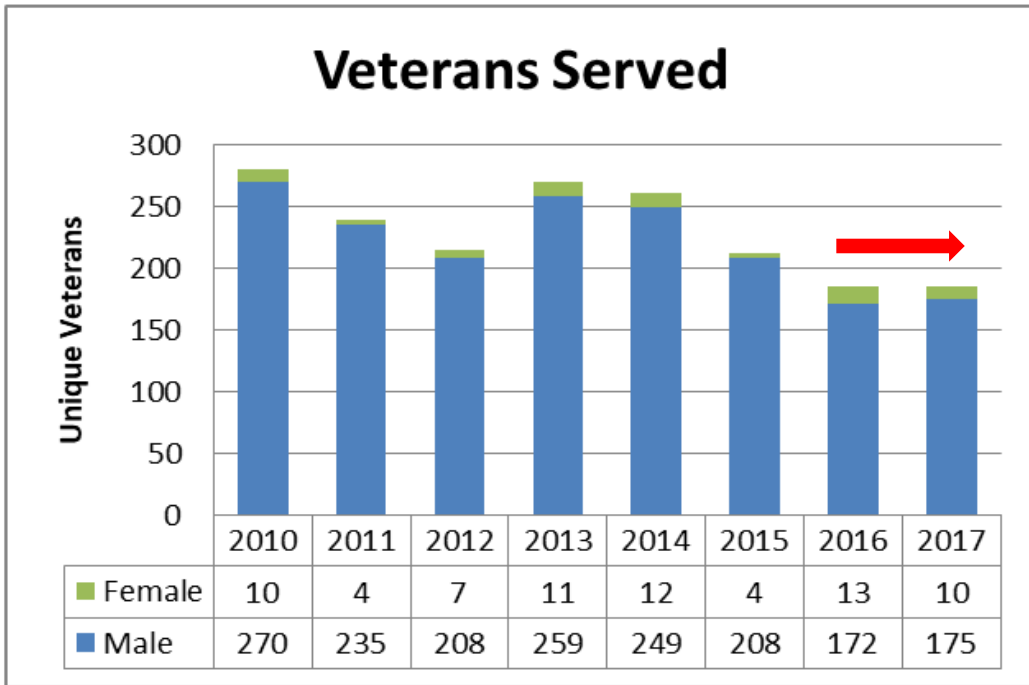
- The community, overall, has lost funding in the amount of \$552,971 or 20.1% from 2014 forward. All funding through the CoC is now directed toward housing, increased inventory.
- The community has lost funding, and associated services, under CoC, associated with support services, equal to \$1,211,158 per year. The support services include; mental health care, youth services, transportation, day care, legal, support services (case management), substance abuse, and relapse. All services focused on the homeless population in general.
- This has resulted in an increased inventory of permanent beds, but absent of support services - the efficacy of the system is jeopardized as it relates to sustainability and recidivism with a specific emphasis on the individual (i.e. return to homelessness).

**Veteran Homelessness in El Paso**

In recent years, there has been a strong focus through cross-agency initiatives to end veteran homelessness, chronic homelessness, and homelessness as it relates to families and youth.

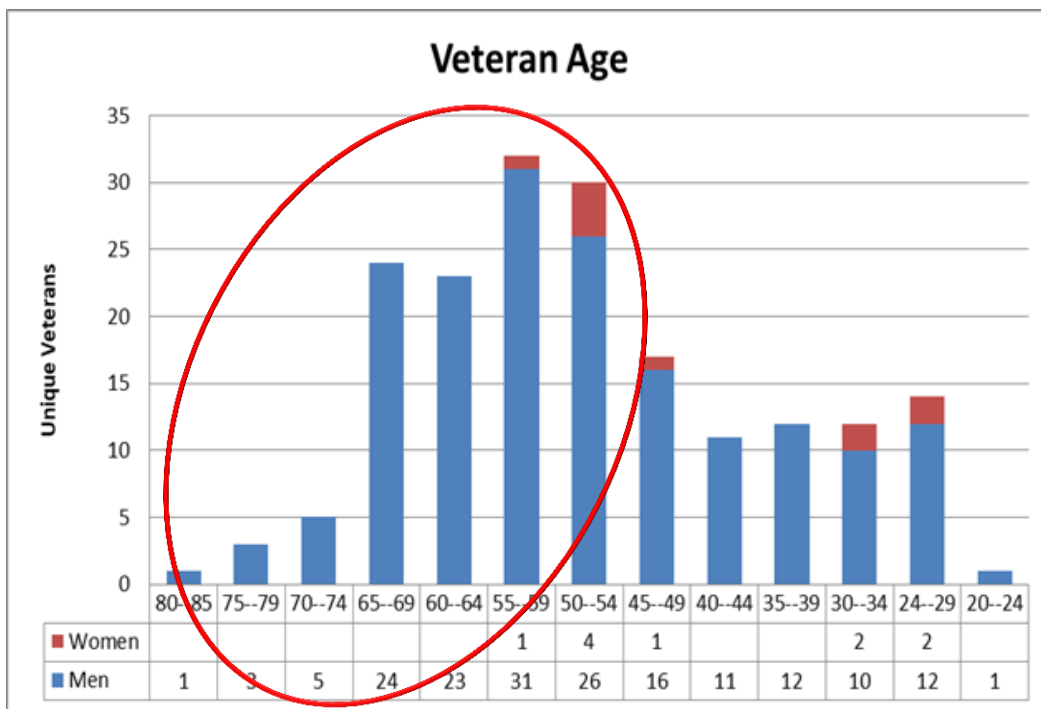
For purposes of this discussion, our comments will now be focused on the veteran homeless initiative. As stated previously, the Opportunity Center provides the only no-barrier shelter in El Paso for both men and women (separate facilities). We also operate the Veteran’s Transitional Living Center (VTLC).

Provided on the following page, are charts which depict the number of veterans served (unique), and shelter nights, for those that access our program(s) with an emphasis on the two 24-hour resource centers (male and female) under the Opportunity Center.



In 2017, the veteran population within our shelters comprised 14% of the total population served, and utilized 19% of the total shelter nights (services).

The figures for 2017 as it relates to individuals served are level with 2016. There is an increase in veteran shelter nights by 30% in 2017 from the prior year. In digging into the data further, a majority (67.4%) are over the age of 50. Additionally, it is the older homeless veteran that consumes a majority of the shelter nights at 81% over the total veteran homeless population.



We, as with many providers who work with the homeless, observe that the hard living conditions of homelessness cause the aging process to speed up and that people living in homelessness are less likely to survive into old age. The National Coalition for the Homeless references in their Fact Sheet on the homeless elderly that street conditions are so severe that “a fifty year old living on the street may possess physical traits resembling a 70 year old.”

## Discussion

Recent initiatives include federal agencies working together with a common objective; in this discussion that objective is to end veteran homelessness – a goal that we as a community have not yet attained.

The City and County of El Paso has historically relied exclusively on funding received through the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) to mitigate and end homelessness. HUD funding (as with the VA) has historically provided for sustainable programming within communities such as El Paso. A community with stated, limited financial resources

As demonstrated in earlier charts, we have seen an overall reduction in HUD (CoC) funding of 20% or approximately \$523,000. This has resulted from a shift in funding priorities toward housing from “safety net” services. This in and of itself is not reflective of the full picture, for in reality we have lost in excess of \$1,211,158 per year in service related dollars that comprise the “safety net” - services which are required in support of Housing First initiatives, and currently unavailable.

As a direct result, we have seen an increase in the number of permanent beds available to the homeless, both veteran and non-veteran but we do not have the ability to provide the appropriate support to the individual to ensure sustainability and prevent recidivism, thus reinforcing the need to provide extended care through “safety net” services.

This is further compounded by the historical, local limitation(s) imposed on recipients of permanent housing funds within our community. A majority of housing assistance is limited to three months, to include SSVF and Rapid Rehousing funds – the principal source of assistance for homeless veterans. It is recognized by all, that the two programs as a result of veteran eligibility requirements are needed to run in concert with one another – thus the need for a single Coordinated Entry process. For veterans that don't meet the SSVF eligibility requirements, HUD funding through Rapid Rehousing is the remaining option. However, with a majority of assistance being limited to three months – and with limited support upon housing placement, recidivism is occurring which leads to further displacement, trauma, and distrust with the system. This is reflective of the increased number of veteran shelter nights within our resource centers.

Sustainability is further complicated through the lack of support services for employment – one of the most critical. For one must recognize that even though housing is in place the homeless are still struggling with their own challenges that placed them within homelessness. Such challenges include poverty, high housing costs, and personal issues such as struggles with mental health and substance abuse. The desire is to integrate these individuals into their community.

Employment is recognized as one of the most critical and effective strategies in preventing and ending homelessness<sup>4</sup>. As such, it should be noted that:

- Given the opportunity, those that are homeless can and want to work
- Employment offered at the earliest stages of engagement with the homeless helps them develop trust, motivation, and hope.
- Work is a critical recovery tool for people with substance abuse and mental health histories, supporting their continued stability.
- Employment services offered within a supportive housing model result in increased net earnings for tenants and decreased reliance on public entitlements.
- Cost-savings and additional tax revenue provided by client income offset more than three quarters of funder investment.

Traditional employment services are based on the premise that clients must be “job ready”. Employment programs need to diverge from this premise to one whose underlying philosophy is that anyone is ready for work. For in reality, the individuals have varying lengths of homelessness – in many cases for several years and they are still struggling with their personal challenges as well as having minimal work and education histories, along with criminal records. Furthermore, an individual’s interest in securing employment can motivate them to take positive steps in their lives. Additionally, it is recognized that entry-level jobs often do not lead to long-term employment or financial security.

As such, this needs to be recognized under a Housing First model for individuals to view professional growth potential and career ladders as fundamental components of work experience, and thus personal security.

### **Closing**

A successful, holistic strategy to end homelessness requires that we incorporate three basic principles in our objectives as it relates to ending homelessness; the provision of services must be person-centered, client-directed, and strengths-based.

- A person-centered approach is based on the idea that an individual is ultimately responsible for his or her self-change allowing the individual to change for the better.
- A client-directed approach means that the client ultimately decides whether to choose services and which services to choose.
- A strengths-based approach focuses on each client’s strengths, skills and abilities enabling them to envision a path around obstacles and toward achievement of goals.

This requires financial, sustainable resources that are currently unavailable to our community in the form of support services to support the Housing First initiative.

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<sup>4</sup> Sources Shaheen and Rio (2007) and ABT Associates (2003).