

**STATEMENT OF
COUNTY OF RIVERSIDE
ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AGENCY
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ACTING DEPUTY DIRECTOR
BEFORE THE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

FINDING SOLUTIONS FOR VETERAN HOMELESSNESS IN SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA

January 20, 2015

Chairman Wenstrup, Ranking Member Takano, and distinguished members of the Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity:

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before this Committee today. On behalf of our County, I would like to thank you for your leadership and support which has been instrumental in providing local communities with the resources needed to serve the nation's most vulnerable veterans. As the representative from Riverside County, I have the opportunity to speak on behalf of the county departments and the partnering agencies that are actively engaged in our local fight against veterans' homelessness. I also have the humble opportunity to represent the homeless veterans in our county, many of which are now housed, that have been assisted through this united national effort.

I am proud to report that our county has made significant progress in ending veterans' homelessness and we are very close to reaching the finish line. Over the course of the last two and half years we have housed over 1,000 veterans but most importantly we have also learned a great deal about what systems need to be changed and what more is needed to assist our veterans. The purpose of my testimony is to share this information with you and to provide some recommendations on how we can further refine our strategies to end not just veterans' homelessness but all homelessness within our communities.

I am also honored to appear before you with my colleagues and in effort to not duplicate information my testimony will be focused on the following areas:

- Riverside County's progress, programs and initiatives; and
- Recommendations for the Committee's consideration

Riverside County's Programs and Progress

Counties play a unique role in the fight against homelessness as the primary provider of public social services at the local level. While the Mayor's Challenge focuses on the efforts of cities to end homelessness, counties have substantial resources that can and should be marshaled for this effort. Additionally, counties have the ability to establish local policies and practices that have a major impact on the way veterans, homeless and low-income residents are serviced and prioritized within our communities. Riverside County has long recognized this fact and has

assumed a leadership role in ensuring that veterans and affordable housing are top priorities for our jurisdiction. This leadership can be found most notably in the passage of the Veterans Assistance Legislation of Riverside County (VALOR) initiative in 2013 and throughout the County's numerous departments.

Veterans Assistance Legislation of Riverside County (VALOR)

The Riverside County Board of Supervisors assumed the lead role in ending veterans' homelessness through the unanimous approval of the Veterans Assistance Legislation of Riverside County commonly known as the VALOR initiative in April, 2013.

The purpose of VALOR is threefold:

1. The Board's public commitment to end homelessness among veterans ahead of the federal deadline;
2. A commitment to enact local policies that will assist homeless veterans with accessing the services and housing they so desperately need; and
3. The creation of the VALOR subcommittee which was tasked with implementing systems changes, enhancing services and most importantly identifying and housing homeless and at-risk veterans.

Although spearheaded by the Board of Supervisors, VALOR was implemented as a public-private effort to rapidly house homeless veterans with an emphasis on engaging partners with the greatest resources to impact homelessness. Housing is always the first the priority using a "housing first" model of care. Secondary to the housing effort is the systems and service change that is necessary to move the entire homeless continuum of care into new mode of functionality which prioritizes permanent housing and the systematic matching of homeless individuals with an open housing unit. All of this is designed to move the county to "functional zero" for homeless veterans and the chronically homeless within the next year.

2014 Veterans Point in Time Count (PIT)

To begin the VALOR initiative, we needed an accurate baseline count of homeless veterans to monitor our impact and progress. This baseline began with data from the 2011 Riverside County Point In Time Count (PIT) which determined that there were 890 homeless veterans in our communities. This count was followed by the 2013 count which found 179 homeless veterans a significant decrease that drove a local debate on the reliability of the PIT to accurately gauge need and demand for homeless veterans' services. In response to this debate, the County's Department of Public Social who serves as lead agent for the Riverside County Continuum of Care obtained grant funds to conduct a veterans-only PIT count in 2014. This count determined that there were 290 homeless veterans of which 173 were unsheltered and included a survey of encountered veterans which was used to drive supportive service programming. The results of this PIT and survey, the *2014 Veterans Homeless County and Survey* can be found online at <http://dpss.co.riverside.ca.us/homeless-programs> . The 2014 number became the initial number used to drive our strategy to eliminate veterans' homelessness in our area. Our next PIT is scheduled for January 27th and will include special efforts to reach veterans.

County Programs and Services

As noted previously, counties have an array of tools that can be utilized to combat homelessness and to provide veteran-centric services. I would like to highlight the following departments and/or programs which play a primary role in Riverside County's response to veterans' homelessness.

- **The Housing Authority of the County of Riverside**
Riverside County is home to one of the highest performing and progressive public housing agencies in the nation. The County's Housing Authority has achieved the "High Performer" designation from HUD for high quality management of its Section 8 program for fourteen consecutive years which puts it in an elite group of less than 10% of all housing authorities across the country. Moreover, the Housing Authority has implemented programs and services targeted to homeless and other special needs populations who require additional supports to obtain and maintain housing. In fact, our local housing authority is one of the very few that has its own homeless programs team complete with outreach workers and case managers. We believe fundamentally that a local public housing agency should be a one stop for all residents with housing needs especially those that are homeless. The Housing Authority operates daily on the principle that its primary mission is to restore lives, strengthen families and revitalize communities through the provision high quality affordable housing. The agency also offers a true public-private approach to housing through our partnership with Section 8 landlords who are instrumental in addressing homelessness. For this reason, the Housing Authority was tapped as lead for the VALOR initiative's housing efforts and brings to the fight against veterans' homelessness: existing partnerships with over 3,000 local landlords and affordable housing developers; funding for affordable housing development; over 8,500 Section 8 vouchers; 469 units of public housing; 539 VASH vouchers; 120 units of supportive permanent housing; 90 units of HIV housing; and 5 full time employees dedicated to homeless housing programs.

- **The Department of Public Social Services**
The Department of Public Social Services (DPSS) serves as the administrative agent for the Riverside County and City Continuum of Care and receives approximately \$7 million in funding annually from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban development to provide housing and services to homeless individuals and families. The Riverside Continuum of Care was selected to participate in the 25 Cities Initiative and this project is being coordinated by DPSS. Under the 25 Cities, the County is aggressively moving all homeless services to a coordinated entry system that aligns the most vulnerable homeless veterans and chronically homeless with the first available housing unit. The system also includes a universal assessment system that is used to compile a master list of veterans in need of housing and a master list of veterans housed. These lists have fundamentally changed the way in which homeless veterans are identified and housed within our County.

- **Veterans Services**

As noted earlier, counties provide a unique range of public services that must be coordinated to address the needs of veterans regardless of housing status. One such department is the Riverside County Office of Veterans Services which is specifically tasked with honoring and enhancing the quality of life for veterans in Riverside County through claims assistance, education, advocacy, and special projects such as the Homeless Veterans Stand Down. The Veterans Services department is an important entry point for many veterans who are seeking assistance through the County's various departments and/or seeking social service assistance through community agencies

➤ **Workforce Development Services**

Riverside County serves the administrator and operator of the Riverside County public workforce system. Employment is critical to ending and preventing homelessness. Riverside County offers priority of service to all veterans seeking services within our center and has implemented the HIRE VALOR program which focuses on the employment needs of homeless veterans participating in the VASH program. We are also working in partnership with the City of Riverside to implement an on-the-job training program for residents of the Riverside Emergency Shelter in an effort to provide work based learning experience, recent work experience and opportunities to earn income while receiving training.

Riverside County Progress

VALOR combined with the 25 Cities initiative has yielded the following results over the course of the last two and half years:

1. 1,007 homeless veterans are now housed;
2. We have funded three new housing developments earmarked for veterans – March Veterans Village, Camp Anza, and Habitat for Humanity's Veterans Enriched Housing;
3. We have implemented a standardized assessment tool and piloted a coordinated entry system for the Continuum of Care; and
4. We have established an active list of all homeless veterans within our county who are still in need of housing and this list is reviewed weekly during a standing call with housing navigators and case managers.

Recommendations

Although we have accomplished much, we have also learned that there are adjustments that can be made to further enhance homeless services for veterans at the community and national level. I would like to share these recommendations with you for your consideration.

1. There is an urgent need for additional units of affordable housing in the Southern California region for low income residents. Affordable housing is one of our best weapons in the fight against homelessness. We need to increase funding for the HOME program, Section 8, and other similar programs that can provide opportunities for communities to further expand the local supply of affordable housing units. These new

communities must include units earmarked for homeless individuals and families. Veterans should receive top priority on waiting lists for these units.

2. Identification documents should not be a major barrier to housing but they continue to be a significant barrier for homeless individuals and veterans. We have allocated millions of dollars to housing programs only to have a homeless veteran with a VASH voucher in hand sit homeless awaiting a state issued ID or birth certificate which is almost always required to rent an apartment. This is unacceptable. We need to implement policy changes at the federal and state level that can provide these necessary identity documents free of charge for homeless veterans.
3. We have achieved significant systems change in the local system of care. We owe a sincere debt of gratitude to the National Alliance to End Homelessness (NAEH) and Community Solutions for providing the leadership and technical assistance to guide us through this process. More is still needed. We need groups such as the National Alliance of Homelessness to set standards for professional training, education, and experience in the homeless service profession. This will facilitate a much higher level of care within the local Continuum of Care's throughout the country.
4. Employment is a critical to ending and preventing homelessness. We must move to the model of "housing first, employment second" and this must be a very close second priority. Employment is not just about income – a job is an important mechanism for connecting to the community and to an individual's self-identity. Funding for workforce programs which focus on successfully reconnecting homeless individuals to the workplace are much needed and would make create significant impact.
5. Finally, we need leverage the expertise and resources of long standing community agencies in our fight against homelessness. Housing Authorities are a prime example of this expertise. Housing Authorities already have long standing relationships with landlords and extensive knowledge of the local rental market. Please consider allowing Housing Authorities to use this skill in housing navigation rather than building this capacity in agencies that are better suited to addressing the clinical needs or emergency shelter needs of homeless veterans.

In closing, I want to thank you for time and support. I began my work with homeless veterans over 13 years ago as an AmeriCorps outreach worker stationed at the VA Loma Linda. Never in my wildest dreams did I believe that in 13 years I would see an end to homelessness among veterans. I think it is only fitting that veterans, even in their time of greatest need, led us on this path and showed us what can be accomplished when we imagine an end to one of our most challenging community issues.

