



Homes For Our Troops: 6 Main Street, Taunton, MA 02780

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Testimony

Before the House of Representatives Committee on Veterans Affairs Subcommittee for Economic Opportunity

Hearing on “A Review of VA’s Specially Adapted Housing Grant Program (SAH)”

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September 6, 2018

Chairman Arrington, Ranking Member O’Rourke and distinguished members of the Veterans’ Affairs Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity. I am grateful that you have granted Homes For Our Troops the opportunity to testify before this subcommittee to review the VA’s Specially Adapted Housing (SAH) Grant Program.

Homes For Our Troops (HFOT) is a national nonprofit based in Taunton, Massachusetts that builds and donates specially adapted custom homes nationwide for severely injured post-9/11 Veterans. Since 2004, we have completed 261 homes in 42 states, and we currently have 94 projects under construction or in the land search process. The homes we build are completely accessible to someone in a wheelchair, and as a result our Veterans are able to live in an environment that is safe and reduces further injury. Our Veterans have all been injured in the Afghanistan and Iraq theaters. As a result of living in a specially adapted, mortgage free home, our home recipients and their families are afforded the opportunity to live safely in a barrier free environment, allowing the Veteran, their spouse, and families to pursue personal and professional goals that might not be possible otherwise.

We are familiar with the SAH Grant eligibility requirements, as we use the grant as a screening criterion for our program. With the exception of blind Veterans, we build homes exclusively for SAH qualified Veterans. Since our beginning in 2004, Homes For Our Troops has worked closely with the Department of Veterans Affairs to assist our severely injured Veterans, and we enjoy a close, productive working relationship. In March of this year, our staff met with the VA SAH representatives to discuss the challenges and recommendations we will highlight in our testimony.

The Specially Adapted Housing Grant Program enables Veterans to regain their independence, enjoy greater economic opportunity, and adapt to their new normal. However, we see several challenges with the SAH program as it is today.

First, we agree with our colleagues from the Wounded Warrior Project and Paralyzed Veterans of America that a number of Veterans who have used their SAH grant to modify their homes will eventually, as a result of the aging process or additional medical complications, require additional extensive modifications to their home. The ability to access the full SAH grant amount a second time, after a set time period from the first grant, would enable these Veterans to continue to live a normal life.



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A major challenge we see with the SAH Grant program is with the eligibility criteria. The post-9/11 generation of Veterans is returning home with injuries that are currently not covered by the SAH grant criteria despite their need for specially adapted housing features. Specifically, Veterans who have non-correctable blindness, and those or who have suffered the loss or loss of use of both hands, do not qualify for SAH benefits. These Veterans qualify for the SHA Grant, which provides significantly less monetary assistance than the SAH grant. As you can imagine, total blindness requires numerous technological and voice activated adaptations to a home to enable the Veteran to regain some of the freedom and independence he or she lost.

Additionally, whether a Veteran loses his or her arms above or below the elbow, they still have lost the most important part, their hands. Again, this requires significant adaptations to the home. Current guidelines are confusing as to what delineates the difference between loss of arms or loss of hands (Exhibits A and B on page 4 of this testimony).

In 2012, Congress expanded eligibility criteria with Public Law 112-154 Honor America's Veterans Act (Exhibit C on page 5 of this testimony). This expansion added the following criteria for SAH eligibility:

The loss, or loss of use of one or more lower extremities due to service on or after September 11, 2001, which so affects the functions of balance or propulsion as to preclude ambulating without the aid of braces, crutches, canes, or a wheelchair

This expansion is only available to 30 recipients per year with a yearly sunset provision. As a result, many Veterans who applied prior to this expansion in 2012 and were denied SAH benefits are unaware that they are now eligible for the SAH Grant. This has caused significant confusion in the Veteran community. We have also encountered situations where VA agents were unaware that a Veteran should be qualified under the expansion criteria.

On an administrative note, many VA offices send SAH checks to Veterans. This can cause delays in receipt of funds, or the check can become lost in the mail or lost once it arrives at the Veteran's home.

The VA does an outstanding job of administering the Specially Adapted Housing program. We have several recommendations we think will further enhance the program.

- 1) Congress alter language to reinstate the full grant if a service-connected disability becomes progressively worse as the veteran ages.**
- 2) Congress expand the SAH criteria to include total blindness.**
- 3) Congress expand the SAH criteria to include loss or loss of use of both hands.**
- 4) VA take steps to ensure all staff are knowledgeable concerning the expansion of the grant criteria. Additionally, the VA can notify all Veterans who were denied SAH eligibility prior to the expansion that took effect on October 1, 2012, that they may now meet the expanded criteria.**
- 5) VA change how they transfer funds in support of the SAH program, shifting to Electronic Funds Transfer to streamline the process and eliminate lost checks.**



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As the post-9/11 Veteran population returns to the civilian world, it is important that the VA and Veterans nonprofits continue to work together to assist these brave men and women in receiving the benefits they have earned.

Homes For Our Troops is committed to working with our partners at both the VA and other Veterans nonprofits to ensure that our Nation's severely injured Veterans are able to regain the freedom and independence they have sacrificed in service to our nation. We appreciate the opportunity to present to this committee the challenges within the current SAH program. By making the changes to the SAH program we have highlighted here, we can ensure that our Veterans receive the opportunity to live in a safe environment that will allow them to continue to contribute to their families, community, and their country.

Thank you,

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Exhibits A,B,C listed on page 4,5



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Exhibit A

Specialty Adapted Housing (SAH) Grant

Eligibility	Living Situation	Ownership	Number of Grants You Can Use
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Loss of or loss of use of both legs, OR • Loss of or loss of use of both arms, OR • Blindness in both eyes having only light perception, plus loss of or loss of use of one leg, OR • The loss of or loss of use of one lower leg together with residuals of organic disease or injury, OR • The loss of or loss of use of one leg together with the loss of or loss of use of one arm, OR • Certain severe burns 	Permanent	Home is owned by an eligible individual	Maximum of 3 grants, up to the maximum dollar amount allowable

Exhibit B

Special Housing Adaptation (SHA) Grant

Eligibility	Living Situation	Ownership	Number of Grants You Can Use
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Blindness in both eyes with 20/200 visual acuity or less, OR • Loss of or loss of use of both hands, OR • Certain severe burn injuries, OR • Certain severe respiratory injuries 	Permanent	Home is owned by an eligible individual or family member	Maximum of 3 grants, up to the maximum dollar amount allowable



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Exhibit C

Specially Adapted Housing (SAH) Grant (Expansion under PL 112-154 Honor America's Veterans Act)

The loss, or loss of use of one or more lower extremities due to service on or after September 11, 2001, which so affects the functions of balance or propulsion as to preclude ambulating without the aid of braces, crutches, canes, or a wheelchair *

** This eligibility criteria is limited to 30 recipients per fiscal year (FY). The cap for FY 2018 was reached in November 2017. Servicemembers or Veterans that have the qualifying disabilities to be rated eligible, but did not receive one of the 30 grants due to the cap being reached, may be able to utilize this benefit in FY 2019 or future years if the authority is continued by law, and provided the new FY cap is not also surpassed.*