

**STATEMENT OF
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BEFORE THE
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
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Good afternoon, Chairman Levin, Ranking Member Bilirakis, and distinguished Members of the Subcommittee. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today on the topic of Veteran homelessness, the challenges faced by homeless women Veterans, and the risk factors and unique challenges faced by all homeless Veterans with respect to nutrition, employment, and criminal justice.

VA San Diego Healthcare System (VASDHS) is committed to improving Veteran outcomes and providing Veterans access to comprehensive homeless programs, services, and resources. We also provide Veterans, including those who are at-risk of or experiencing homelessness, with a full spectrum of services designed to meet their unique needs. VASDHS is committed to ending homelessness among Veterans. Our focus is threefold:

- Conducting coordinated outreach to proactively seek out Veterans in need of assistance;
- Connecting homeless and at-risk Veterans with housing solutions, health care, community employment services, and other required supports; and
- Collaborating with Federal, state, and local agencies; employers; housing providers; faith-based and community non-profit organizations; and others to expand employment and affordable housing options for Veterans exiting homelessness.

Introduction

VASDHS is accredited by The Joint Commission and serves Veterans throughout San Diego and Imperial Valley Counties. VASDHS is in La Jolla, California with community-based outpatient clinics (CBOC) located in Chula Vista, Escondido, Imperial Valley, Mission Valley, Oceanside, Sorrento Valley, and the Rio VA Clinic in San Diego. The number of Veterans in San Diego and Imperial Valley Counties is estimated to be 247,074. In Fiscal Year (FY) 2018, VASDHS treated 84,712 Veterans. The total number of outpatient visits for FY 2018 was 983,451, which included 109,498 at the Oceanside Clinic. We provide medical, surgical, mental health, geriatric, spinal cord injury, and advanced rehabilitation services.

Policy Issues Related to Veterans Homelessness (Risk Factors)

According to the 2019 Point in Time (PIT) Count conducted in January, the San Diego region reported a total of 8,102 homeless individuals, of which 1,068 (13 percent)

identify as Veterans. Veteran status and character of discharge are not verified during the Count. Of those who identify as Veterans, 644 were sheltered and 424 were unsheltered. The total number of homeless Veterans in the region decreased by 18 percent since the 2018 PIT count, and the unsheltered numbers decreased from the previous year by 35 percent. Since 2011, the region's overall number of homeless Veterans has decreased by 35 percent. In the 2019 PIT Count, the City of Oceanside had a count of 483 homeless individuals. Because the PIT Count does not break down Veteran status by City, the exact count of Veterans in Oceanside on the night of the Count is not known. However, utilizing the overall percentage of Veterans in the region, it can be estimated that approximately 63 homeless Veterans were in Oceanside on the night of the Count.

VA's Homeless Veteran programs comprise the largest integrated network of homeless treatment and assistance services in the Nation. As a component of this network, VASDHS strives to provide a continuum of service—from outreach to permanent housing—to our homeless Veteran population. VASDHS partners with the local community to offer a wide array of special programs and initiatives designed to help homeless Veterans live as self-sufficiently and independently as possible.

Over the past 5 years, VA and its partners have made a concerted effort to collaborate at the Federal level to ensure strategic use of resources to end Veteran homelessness. Coordinated entry systems (CES) are one outcome of this coordinated effort. CESs represent the systematic approach that is needed at the community level to ensure that resources are being utilized in the most effective way possible and that every Veteran in that community is offered the resources he or she needs to end their homelessness. All homeless Veterans in a given community are impacted by the coordinated entry system, given that its framework is designed to promote community-wide commitment to the goal of ending homelessness and utilizing community-wide resources (including VA resources) in the most efficient way possible for those Veterans who are in most need. This includes the prioritization of resources for those Veterans experiencing chronic, literal street homelessness.

The VASDHS Health Care for Homeless Veteran (HCHV) Program fully participates in the regional CES which has been recognized by Community Solutions in 2017 as a “national example.”

VASDHS HCHV is designed to provide services to homeless Veterans and assist them in obtaining health care benefits within VASDHS or other local community programs if they are ineligible for VHA services. A priority of VASDHS HCHV is to break the cycle of homelessness using community resources, including permanent supportive housing programs; transitional housing programs; prevention and diversion programs; rapid-rehousing programs; substance use treatment programs; medical and mental health services; employment services; and/or case management. Sub-populations served range from those who are newly homeless and can self-resolve, to those who need temporary housing with short-term intensive services, to those that

have severe mental health and/or substance use disorders and require ongoing supportive services to maintain permanent housing.

VASDHS HCHV manages a wide array of Homeless Veteran programs including those focused on:

1. Conducting coordinated outreach to seek out Veterans in need of assistance.
 - VASDHS HCHV has Outreach Social Workers that provide services at VA facility-based clinics, including La Jolla and Oceanside; at the regional Veteran emergency shelter/tent; or at various locations. The Outreach staff additionally go into the field alongside community partners, such as the San Diego Police Department's Homeless Outreach Team and the Oceanside Police Department's Homeless Outreach Team. The Outreach team responds to calls from the National Call Center for Homeless Veterans and responds to hospital-based consults submitted by VASDHS providers that are working with homeless Veterans in any of our locations.
 - VASDHS Veterans Justice Outreach (VJO) staff provide outreach services in local jails to justice-involved Veterans. These outreach efforts are offered alongside staff from the Veterans Benefits Administration to ensure a full range of resources. Individualized services are offered, with an effort to assist in discharge planning to prevent homelessness upon release. VJO Specialists staff local and Federal Veterans Treatment Courts with an effort to support justice-involved Veterans engaged in treatment services.
 - VASDHS is the co-founder of Stand Down, the homeless Veteran outreach and engagement event that started in San Diego 31 years ago in collaboration with Veterans Village of San Diego, a local community partner, and has since grown into a national program, replicated by other sites throughout the Nation.

2. Connecting homeless and at-risk Veterans with housing solutions, health care, community employment services, and other required supports. VASDHS HCHV offers a variety of services to homeless Veterans and/or Veterans at risk for homelessness.

- These programs include: Department of Housing and Urban Development-VA Supportive Housing Program (HUD-VASH), offering permanent supportive housing; Sponsor-Based permanent housing programs; Grant and Per Diem (GPD), offering transitional housing and program services; Contracted Residential Services Programs (CRS), offering specialty transitional housing and program services such as Recuperative Care and Safe Haven; Outreach, providing street-based and clinic-based outreach services, as well as responding to the National Homeless Call Center and VASDHS' hospital-based consults; Homeless - Patient Aligned Care Team, offering primary care services to homeless Veterans; and VJO and Veterans Treatment Court programs. VASDHS HCHV additionally collaborates with adjunct programs, such as the VA-funded Supportive Services for Veteran Families (SSVF) program, to

ensure Veterans' accessibility to prevention, diversion, and rapid rehousing programs.

- VHS DHS HCHV participates in the S.A.V.E. program, a partnership between HCHV and VAS DHS' Suicide Prevention Program, whereby homeless program staff provide suicide prevention training to community partners and first responders.
- HCHV Homeless Veterans Community Employment Services (HVCES) program connects Veterans to local employers and assists Veterans through individual and group services to access competitive employment opportunities. HCHV staff refer/link Veterans to the VA's Compensated Work Therapy Program and Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment Programs. HVCES staff also refer/link Veterans to the Homeless Veterans Reintegration Programs, a Department of Labor-funded program offered by local grantees.

3. Collaborating with Federal, state, and local agencies; employers; housing providers; faith-based and community nonprofits; and others to expand employment and affordable housing options for Veterans exiting homelessness. VAS DHS collaborates with numerous Federal, state, and local partners to end homelessness among Veterans and has developed well-established partnerships with many different faith-based and non-profit programs.

- **Permanent supportive housing:** VAS DHS HCHV program collaborates with HUD, San Diego Housing Commission, County of San Diego Public Housing Authority, City of Oceanside Public Housing Authority, and various Project-Based housing organizations contracted to offer HUD-VASH units, such as Trestle Development, Hyder & Company, Affirmed Housing, and Solari Enterprises.
- **Permanent housing programs:** VAS DHS HCHV collaborates with San Diego Housing Commission, Alpha Square, and local SSVF programs, including, Interfaith Community Services (ICS), Veterans Villages of San Diego (VVSD), Volunteers of America (VOA), Southwest VOA, People Assisting the Homeless (PATH), and Veterans Community Services (VCS).
- **Transitional Housing programs:** VAS DHS HCHV collaborates with St. Vincent de Paul/Father Joe's Villages (SVdP), ICS, VVSD of San Diego, VOA, Southwest VOA, and PATH.
- **CRS Programs:** VAS DHS HCHV collaborates with SVdP and ICS.
- **VJO:** VAS DHS HCHV collaborates with San Diego County Sheriff's Department, Vista Detention Center, San Diego Superior Court - Veterans Treatment Court, Federal Military Diversion Court, Federal Veterans Treatment Court.
- **Outreach:** VAS DHS HCHV collaborates with San Diego Day Center, Family Health Centers of San Diego, San Diego Police Department Homeless Outreach Team (HOT), Oceanside Police Department HOT, City of Chula Vista Police Department's HOT, SVdP, ICS, VVSD, Southwest VOA, Veterans Community Services, Alpha Project, McAlister

Institute, Union of Pan Asian Communities, National Alliance for Mental Illness, PATH, County of San Diego Health and Human Services, Downtown San Diego Partnership, and The Salvation Army.

- **Stand Down:** VASDHS is the co-founder of Stand Down, alongside VVSD.
- **Coordinated Entry System:** VASDHS HCHV collaborates with the Regional Task Force on the Homeless, which is the local Continuum of Care Council. VASHDS is an active Board Member of the region's Continuum of Care Council.
- **Other non-profit organizations providing goods and services:** VASDHS HCHV collaborates with the Elks Club, AmVets, and the Veterans Service Organizations.

In addition, VASDHS HCHV has actively participated in past local community initiatives such as the Mayor of San Diego's 1,000 Veterans program and Project 25, as well as nationwide efforts, such as Built for Zero and the 25 Cities Initiative.

These community partners have been strong partners in our efforts and we appreciate their contributions to our Veterans' health and welfare. VASDHS has worked with our community partners for more than 25 years. Ending Veteran homelessness depends heavily upon collaborative, joint efforts from community agencies and local governments.

Homeless Women Veterans

According to the 2019 PIT Count, the San Diego region has 83 homeless women that identify as Veterans, of which 48 are sheltered and 35 are unsheltered. VASDHS HCHV offers services to women Veterans in the GPD programs, located at Interfaith Community Services in Oceanside and VVSD in the City of San Diego. VVSD additionally receives special needs funding for two of their VA-grant programs to serve women Veterans and women Veterans with families. The local Veterans Emergency Shelter, privately funded and operated by VVSD, offers emergency shelter beds to women Veterans. VASDHS HCHV staff have established relationships with the VVSD shelter program staff and are able to assist with referrals for women Veterans when beds are available. VASDHS HCHV collaborates with the Women Veterans Program at VASDHS, which offers resources to women Veterans, as well as connects them to specialty care for medical and mental health services. VASDHS recently implemented an Intimate Partner Violence program and VASDHS HCHV has assigned homeless program staff for this area of specialty to be trained this fall.

VA has made significant progress serving women Veterans in recent years, but homelessness among women Veterans remains an important concern and focus. Women Veterans can face many challenges when returning to civilian life, including raising children on their own and dealing with the psychological after effects of events such as military sexual trauma, employment, and housing barriers. Local Communities across the Nation are continuing to align resources to address these unique challenges.

VA Women's Health services programs are engaged with to support a systematic and coordinated approach to care:

- **Women Veteran Program Managers (WVPM)** are located at every VA Medical Center (VAMC). WVPMs help coordinate all the services that women Veterans may need. Services include primary care, pregnancy care, psychiatric care and sexual trauma counseling, inpatient medical/surgical care, programs for homeless women Veterans, and quality of care issues.
- **Military Sexual Trauma (MST)** is the term used by VA to refer to sexual assault or repeated, threatening sexual harassment experienced during military service. Homeless women Veterans who use VA health care have higher rates of experiencing MST compared to all women Veterans who use VA health care. MST-related health care for physical and mental health conditions is available free of charge at every VA facility for eligible persons. There is MST Coordinators at every VAMC who can connect Veterans who have experienced MST to VA health care programs and services.

Mental Illness

Secretary Wilkie recognizes homeless Veterans are a high-risk population for suicide and has made suicide prevention one of his top priorities.

VA's National Center on Homelessness among Veterans published research in 2018 (https://www.va.gov/HOMELESS/nchav/research/HERS6_Suicide.asp) that found homelessness is associated with an increased rate of all-cause mortality and of suicide in Veterans. A study by John McCarthy highlighted at the VA Homeless Evidence and Research Synthesis Roundtable Proceedings in 2018 found that the suicide rate among Veterans with homelessness in the past year was 81.0 per 100,000 as compared to Veterans without recent history of homelessness with a rate of 35.8 suicides per 100,000.

Because suicide prevention is one of the Secretary's top priorities, VA Homeless Programs are required to collaborate with Suicide Prevention programs using the S.A.V.E. program to cross-train homeless program staff on suicide prevention programs and to enable homeless program staff to train community providers and first responders on suicide and suicide prevention. Additionally, this team meets regularly to review high-risk Veterans identified by the Recovery Engagement and Coordination for Health program to discuss and develop appropriate treatment plans to address risk factors. VASDHS HCHV has staff from the CES program, the VJO program, and Outreach program that meet with the Suicide Prevention Coordinator monthly. Staff involved in this effort have provided formal training to local GPD Providers as well as other Veteran community partners and first responders.

Affordable Housing

VA continues to promote the establishment of affordable and permanent supportive housing and works with all partners to encourage efforts aimed at financing and developing additional housing stock to address the market factors. VASDHS's Homeless Program is working with San Diego Housing Commission to open project-

based housing units for the HUD-VASH program. The first project came online in the Spring of 2019, and two additional programs will be opening this fall. VASDHS's Homeless Program is currently in talks with two prospective community partners about the possibility of converting tenant-based vouchers to project-based vouchers to create more available units in the region. In addition, VA and HUD have awarded the San Diego Housing Commission and County of San Diego Public Housing Authority 100 project-based vouchers to create dedicated units subsidized by these HUD-VASH vouchers.

Criminal Justice History

Studies of Veterans receiving VA homeless services have shown that 65% have a history of incarceration in prison or jail. Criminal justice histories create barriers—in addition to those noted above—to permanent housing, employment, education, and other resources, further limiting VA's ability to help homeless Veterans access these resources. This limitation is particularly acute for Veterans with histories of sexual offenses, for whom barriers to critical resources imposed by Federal, state, and local authorities pervade most areas of life. VA serves Veterans with criminal justice histories in its own programs (e.g., HUD-VASH) and facilitates Veterans' access to legal services, which may offer opportunities for record expungement, however, access barriers for those with criminal justice histories continue to limit the ability of many Veterans to take advantage of non-VA resources.

Employment

The lack of employment opportunities and services that mitigate barriers to employment will adversely impact housing stability and community integration for formerly homeless Veterans. Without enough income, transitioning homeless Veterans will not be able to exit homelessness into permanent housing successfully. As mentioned above, VA's HVCES staff work closely with community partners and VA Medical Facilities to ensure that a range of employment services are accessible to Veterans who have experienced homelessness.

VA continues to support Vocational Development Specialists who are embedded in homeless program teams and serve as Employment Specialists and Community Employment Coordinators. In addition, HVCES program staff ensure that Veterans who have experienced homelessness, including chronically homeless Veterans, have access to a range of employment services that complement existing medical center-based employment services and are a bridge to employment opportunities and resources in the local community.

- In April 2018, the HVCES program set a national goal of reaching 10,000 unique instances of employment (each episode of employment gained by a Veteran) between April 1, 2018, and March 31, 2019.
- As of April 1, 2019, there were over 21,000 unique instances of employment, more than double the employment goal for Veterans engaged in or who exited from VHA Homeless programs or Services.

Data Sharing

Due to the transient nature of this population, a loss of access to Veteran health care information may also lead to inaccurate master by-name lists of Veterans experiencing homelessness in local communities and local resource planning as a result. Improving data sharing processes between VA and communities will ensure that Veterans experiencing homelessness have access to available services and resources. The risk of not improving data sharing processes will impact community's ability to successfully assess needs of homeless Veterans and match services to meet those needs.

Reducing Veteran Homelessness

Reducing the number of Veterans who become homeless continues to be a vital step towards VA's goal of ending homelessness among Veterans. VA is working to improve predictive strategies and deploying evidence-based practices designed to identify and prevent homelessness. VA has begun a national rollout of the Rapid Resolution Initiative which expands on a pilot program begun in FY 2018 to reunify Veterans with family members or friends as an alternative to shelter entry. SSVF is supporting mediation training by conducting free train-the-trainer programs for grantees around the country supported by an SSVF technical assistance grant. The train-the-trainer approach literally trains grantee staff to become trainers, so they can educate other staff in their agency and the broader community on these mediation techniques. VA Community Entry Specialists have also been invited to these trainings so VAMC staff are able to join this collaborative effort. In addition, SSVF has provided grantees with additional funding so they can support education for their staff on these techniques. Using mediation training and modest financial incentives through the SSVF program, VA is working with HUD, the U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness, and other Federal agencies to create policies and train community-based staff to support implementation of this model. VASDHS SSVF providers have been working with VASDHS HCHV to implement the Rapid Resolution program locally in FY 2020.

In addition, VASDHS HCHV uses results from the Community Homelessness Assessment, Local Education, and Networking Groups for Veterans (Project CHALENG) to identify unmet needs and encourage new partnership development to meet those needs. Over the years, CHALENG has helped build thousands of relationships between VA and community agencies so they can better serve homeless Veterans locally. Data from the survey on Veterans' unmet needs have assisted VA in evaluating programs for their scale, scope, improvement, and effectiveness to prevent and end homelessness for our Nation's Veterans.

Unique Challenges

Nutrition, the Criminal Justice System, Health Care, and Employment

Significant progress has been made in preventing and ending Veteran homelessness. The number of Veterans experiencing homelessness in the United States has declined by nearly half since 2010, as more than 700,000 Veterans and their family members have been permanently housed or prevented from becoming homeless.

Although significant progress has been made, homeless and at-risk Veterans are faced with many challenges. VA has taken the following actions to address these challenges.

Nutrition

In 2018, VA partnered with Feeding America with a shared goal and commitment to Veterans who require immediate hunger assistance in support of ending Veteran food insecurity. Through this partnership, VA and Feeding America have worked together to support participating Feeding America network food banks and VA medical facilities, through the development of pop-up food pantries at 18 VAMCs. Through these pantries, more than 600,000 meals have been served to more than 30,000 Veterans and their family members who were experiencing food insecurities or those at risk of experiencing food insecurity. This partnership is growing as more VAMCs set up pantries through this partnership.

VJO

VA serves justice-involved Veterans through two dedicated national programs, both prevention-oriented components of VA's Homeless programs: Health Care for Reentry Veterans (HCRV) and VJO. Known collectively as the Veterans Justice Programs, HCRV and VJO facilitate access to needed VA health care and other services for Veterans at all stages of the criminal justice process, from initial contact with law enforcement through community reentry following incarceration.

Part of the continuum of services offered by VASDHS HCHV is the VJO program. This program provides resources, referrals, and case management services by VJO Specialists to Veterans with a variety of justice-involved needs, ranging from those participating in Treatment Court to those who are incarcerated, those that may be on probation/parole, and for those in need of homeless court advocacy.

VJO Specialists are assigned to provide case management services to Veterans involved in the following VTC: San Diego's Superior Court Veterans Treatment Court, Federal Military Diversion Court, and Federal Veterans Treatment Court.

The VJO program works closely with the Sheriff Department in the Vista Detention Center's Veterans Module to offer information, resources, and participates in discharge planning for incarcerated Veterans to ensure that Veterans are linked to programs to address issues related to housing, substance use, medical care, mental health, and employment programs prior to their release. Specifically, many Veterans are linked by the VJO Specialists to VA-funded GPD programs, the VASDHS Alcohol and Drug Treatment Program as part of their probation/parole. A VJO Specialist provides case management services after release from the Veterans Module to ensure greater success and to help reduce recidivism. This program has won several awards for excellence and has since been replicated by other Sheriff Departments nationally.

Expanding Access

H.R. 2398 would amend the United States Housing Act of 1937 and title 38, United States Code (U.S.C.), to include those who are ineligible for other VA Homeless

programs authorized by 38 U.S.C. 2011, 2012, 2013, 2044, and 2061. As VA expressed in a letter to the Subcommittee on May 31, 2019, VA supports the expansion of eligibility in section 1(b) of the bill, although we note that the amendments made by section 1(a) of the bill are unnecessary because there is no eligibility issue on the HUD authorization side. This legislation is designed to match HUD-VASH eligibility criteria to that of the GPD and SSVF programs. Although VA supports this proposed legislation as it will allow additional vulnerable chronically homeless Veterans to receive much-needed HUD-VASH vouchers and case management, we note that in expanding eligibility, VA and HUD will need to coordinate to ensure responsible program implementation in order to maintain continued quality of care and success of the HUD-VASH program.

VA also supports H.R. 716 if amended, as the bill is similar to a legislative proposal in VA's FY 2020 budget request. VA testified on this bill at a July 19, 2019, Subcommittee hearing.

Conclusion

VA, VASDHS, and the Oceanside Clinic, are committed to providing the high-quality care our Veterans have earned and deserve. We continue to improve access and services to meet the needs of Veterans. We support all efforts to increase Homeless Veteran HUD-VASH prioritization eligibility. We appreciate the opportunity to appear before you today and the resources Congress provides VA to care for Veterans.