

**Statement of Assistant Secretary R. Hunter Kurtz  
Public and Indian Housing  
Department of Housing and Urban Development**

**Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity  
House Veterans Affairs Committee  
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**Introduction**

Good afternoon Chairman Levin, Ranking Member Bilirakis and members of the subcommittee. It was a pleasure to testify before the Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity this past summer, and I look forward to updating you on the efforts of the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and our federal partners to end veteran homelessness across the United States.

HUD is committed to ending veteran homelessness by working collaboratively with our partners and maximizing the effectiveness of all existing resources. Thanks to funding from Congress and close collaboration among federal and local partners, the nation has continued to make progress in addressing veteran homelessness and creating sustainable federal and local systems that quickly respond to homelessness.

I am honored to serve as HUD's Assistant Secretary for Public and Indian Housing (PIH). The HUD Veterans Affairs Supportive Housing (HUD-VASH) program, jointly administered by HUD, within PIH, and the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), within the Veterans Health Administration Homeless Program Office, provides homes to veterans who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. HUD staff, local housing authorities, Continuums of Care, and local Veterans Affairs Medical Centers (VAMCs) work in tandem to provide homes and services to homeless veterans. I can attest that this program has been successful in providing a home – not just a house – to our nation's veterans and their families.

**General HUD Homeless Assistance Programs**

HUD's Office of Community Planning and Development (CPD) provides about \$2.4 billion annually to communities to help end homelessness. Funding is primarily used for permanent supportive housing, which successfully houses people with long histories of homelessness and significant disabilities. Permanent supportive housing can reduce hospitalization and emergency room utilization while dramatically improving the well-being of the people it serves. HUD also provides funding for rapid re-housing, a cost-effective strategy that helps people move quickly into housing, provides short-term financial assistance, and provides supportive services to help the homeless stabilize in their housing, increase their employment and income, and connect them to community supports. HUD also supports emergency shelter, transitional housing, and many other types of assistance dedicated to ending homelessness.

In 2017, approximately 17,000 homeless veterans were served using \$97 million through HUD's Continuum of Care (CoC) program. Most of that funding is for permanent supportive housing that houses approximately 10,000 homeless veterans with disabilities. Thousands more homeless veterans are served with rapid re-housing, emergency shelter, and other assistance. Additionally, CoCs continue to work closely with VA and Public Housing Authorities (PHAs) to effectively use HUD-VASH resources.

### **Housing and Urban Development – Veterans Affairs Supportive Housing (HUD-VASH)**

HUD-VASH is part of the Housing Choice Voucher (HCV) program in the Office of Public and Indian Housing. The HCV program currently houses over 2.3 million families and had an annual budget of more than \$20 billion in 2019. HUD-VASH is the only PIH program dedicated to homeless veterans; however, many formerly homeless families, including veteran families, are assisted through the regular HCV program.

The HUD-VASH program has been very successful in its approach to addressing veteran homelessness. The program provides long-term housing assistance to the most vulnerable veterans experiencing homelessness by combining HCV rental assistance for homeless veterans with case management and clinical services provided by VA. VA provides these services for participating veterans at various locations, including VAMCs and community-based outreach clinics.

In the HUD-VASH program, the local VA case managers screen and determine veteran eligibility for the program. These HUD-VASH eligible veterans are then referred to the partnering PHA to receive their housing voucher assistance. By agreeing to administer the HUD-VASH program, the PHA is relinquishing its authority to determine the eligibility of families in accordance with regular HCV program rules and PHA policies with two exceptions: PHAs are required to prohibit admission of any member of the household subject to a lifetime registration requirement under a state sex offender registration program and income limits.

A total of \$795 million has been appropriated in new HUD-VASH funding to date. HUD-VASH vouchers are renewed based on actual leasing, as is the case for the HCV program generally. When a household leaves the program, their voucher is typically reissued to another eligible household. Since 2008, over 170,000 veterans and their families have moved into housing with a HUD-VASH voucher. As of the last day of FY2019, more than 77,000 veterans and their families were housed with a HUD-VASH voucher.

HUD-VASH vouchers are specifically targeted to communities based on geographic need, meaning the size of the eligible population. Every year since 2008, HUD and VA have collaboratively awarded new HUD-VASH vouchers based on geographic need and administrative capacity. Using HUD metrics of how we calculate housing, a total of more than 100,000 HUD-VASH vouchers have been awarded to more than 600 PHAs between 2008 and 2019. In addition to the HUD-VASH vouchers specifically awarded as project-based voucher (PBV) assistance, PHAs, with the support of their local VA partners, have the ability to convert any of their existing HUD-VASH vouchers to PBV.

The Housing Opportunity Through Modernization Act of 2016 (HOTMA) streamlined this process for PHAs. PHAs can now convert any of their existing HUD-VASH portfolio without additional approval by HUD, subject to statutory and regulatory requirements of the PBV program. Because the landscape of veteran homelessness across the country has changed since 2008, HUD and VA are working collaboratively to ensure that all HUD-VASH resources are being used as efficiently and effectively as possible.

These efforts around HUD-VASH demonstrate HUD's commitment to optimize the effectiveness of the HUD-VASH program and allow for local flexibility in addressing the homeless veteran population.

### **Tribal HUD-VASH**

The Tribal HUD-VASH demonstration program provides rental assistance and supportive services to veterans who are Native American and experiencing homelessness, or at risk of homelessness, while living on or near a reservation or other Indian areas. Veterans participating in this program are provided housing assistance through HUD and supportive services through VA to foster long-term stability and prevent a return to homelessness.

The pilot was first authorized in the Consolidated and Further Continuing Appropriations Act, 2015 (Public Law 113-235, approved December 16, 2014) and Congress has continued its support in subsequent years by enacting funds for renewal grants and modest expansion. Thirty tribes or tribally designated housing entities were invited to participate in the program based on their level of need and administrative capacity. Ultimately, 26 of those invited submitted applications and were awarded grants totaling \$5.9 million to fund approximately 500 units of rental assistance for veterans and their families, and to fund associated administrative costs. HUD has renewed these grants annually and will fund additional grants or units of assistance using funding provided in the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2019.

Implementation of the program is overseen by PIH's Office of Native American Programs (ONAP) and VA is responsible for providing case management services and referring eligible veterans for housing assistance. As of the end of 2019, 500 veterans have received case management service under this program. Additionally, since the inception of the program, almost 150 additional veterans that were previously housed under the program subsequently found permanent or temporary housing or graduated from case management. The program is producing tangible results, housing Native American veterans and their families who were living in severely inadequate units – without running water, heat or electricity – or in overcrowded living conditions.

### **Continued Collaboration with VA and USICH**

HUD has worked closely with VA for many years administering HUD-VASH. Together, HUD, VA, and the U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness (USICH) have implemented a joint decision-making structure known as "Solving Veterans Homelessness as One" (SVHO) that assists in coordinating agency efforts and develops and implements a range of strategies for preventing and ending veteran homelessness. This structure allows us to jointly review data on

HUD-VASH and other programs and to coordinate policymaking to ensure our assistance is integrated and impactful.

This collaboration has also helped us troubleshoot any issues and improve utilization in the HUD-VASH program, coordinate the implementation of the Tribal HUD-VASH program, better target available assistance to those with the highest needs, and ensure all resources across agencies are prioritized for communities with greater numbers of veterans experiencing homelessness.

HUD, VA, and USICH have also used the structure of SVHO to work together to create a set of standards to evaluate whether communities have ended veteran homelessness. Since 2014, more than 880 mayors, city and county officials, and governors have set a goal of ending veteran homelessness in their communities. As of January 7, 2020, 78 communities and 3 States have achieved the goal.

The agencies also collaborate on the implementation of Coordinated Entry Systems. Coordinated Entry ensures that a person experiencing homelessness has simple access to housing and other homelessness resources. The collaboration between HUD and VA helps to ensure that veterans have access to all the resources in a community, including VA dedicated resources, no matter where and how they access assistance.

### **Technical Assistance for Communities**

Because the ability of any community to meet the goal of ending veteran homelessness depends on the strength of each community's leadership and successful implementation of proven strategies, HUD and its federal partners are committed to helping communities get there. In addition to providing funding for homeless assistance, HUD supports several technical assistance initiatives that have helped reduce veteran homelessness. The Built for Zero and Vets@Home initiatives help communities implement best practices and learn from the success of other communities. Both initiatives were designed with the explicit goal of helping communities reach the goal of ending veteran homelessness.

Some best practices have included incorporating HUD-VASH in a larger coordinated entry system to ensure there are multiple access points for veterans seeking help, coordinated outreach efforts to locate all veterans in need of assistance, and better data sharing across systems to ensure veterans do not fall through the cracks.

HUD has worked with its partners to identify specific strategies for utilizing HUD-VASH vouchers in high-cost, low-vacancy communities. These are often the communities with the greatest need. In addition to converting HUD-VASH to PBV, PHAs have used their flexibility to increase their payment standard, including the adoption of exception payment standards, to be competitive in the private market. Another strategy has been intensive landlord outreach and maintaining landlord relationships. PHAs have also been able to connect with local service providers that are able to assist veterans in their housing search.

In an effort to improve the utilization of existing HUD-VASH resources and ensure maximum impact of new vouchers, in FY19, HUD instituted a utilization threshold for PHAs to be eligible for additional HUD-VASH vouchers. HUD set this threshold at 70% current HUD-VASH leasing, with some exceptions.

## **Results**

Each year, communities across the country conduct Point-in-Time (PIT) counts of people experiencing homelessness. The PIT count, held at the end of January 2019, includes people living in shelters as well as people sleeping on sidewalks, in parks, in cars, or in other places not meant for human habitation. Based on that count, veteran homelessness decreased by 2.1 percent (793 veterans) in 2019 and has declined by nearly 50 percent since 2010. This kind of reduction is historic, and HUD-VASH has been a primary reason for this progress.

A robust body of evidence shows that the combination of permanent supportive housing, rapid re-housing, and other targeted interventions can indeed end homelessness. Although there was a 2.7 percent increase in general homelessness in 2019, that was largely driven by the 16.4 percent increase in one state: California. The trend in the other 49 states shows a significant decrease in homelessness. The long-term national trend and the results in the many communities that have ended veteran homelessness show the positive results of a coordinated effort.

## **Conclusions**

A great deal of progress has been made in the way we work together to address veteran homelessness. However, there is still a lot of work to be done. The HUD-VASH program continues to be a model for interagency collaboration and one of the best tools we have for ending veteran homelessness. We must continue to find ways to maximize the effectiveness of the HUD-VASH program, while also assisting communities in utilizing all available homeless assistance resources.

Thank you again for this opportunity to update you on HUD's efforts to end veteran homelessness.