

**Written Testimony for
Anthony Love, Interim Executive Director,
U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness
Before the House Veterans' Affairs
Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity**

June 16, 2021

Good morning, Chairman Levin, Ranking Member Moore, and distinguished members of the subcommittee. I am Anthony Love, interim executive director of the United States Interagency Council on Homelessness, otherwise known as USICH. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today on the topic of veteran homelessness – an issue I have dedicated my career to addressing. Before joining USICH, I served as the senior advisor and director of community engagement for the Department of Veterans Affairs Veterans Health Administration (VHA) Homeless Programs Office. I hope to bring awareness today about how this population has been uniquely impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic and how legislative relief is being implemented to help veterans experiencing homelessness.

The United States Interagency Council on Homelessness

First, let me explain the role of USICH. The U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness, originally authorized by Congress through Title II of the landmark Stewart B. McKinney Homeless Assistance Act of 1987 (PL 100-77) to serve as an “independent establishment” within the executive branch, is charged with coordinating the federal government’s collaborative response and effort to prevent and end homelessness. We are the *only* federal agency whose sole mission is focused on ending homelessness. Our council consists of leaders from 19 other federal agencies, including the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). We share a vision of what it means to end all homelessness, and a goal to ensure that when it does occur, it is a rare, brief, and one-time experience. USICH believes that housing is a human right and that all people should have access to safe and affordable housing.

We work directly with states, communities, and private partners across the country to help them implement evidence-based practices, such as Housing First, and to make the most efficient and effective use of all the resources at their disposal. The billions of dollars invested in addressing homelessness over the last year have made USICH more vital than ever. Our regional coordinators are in constant communication with governors, mayors, Continuum of Care leaders, and other stakeholders who are eager to use the American Rescue Plan to spur long-lasting change in the lives of people experiencing homelessness. The American Rescue Plan presents a massive opportunity to not only help people survive this pandemic but to secure long-term housing for people who currently lack it. Our job is to ensure that opportunity is not missed.

In our work over the last decade, we have achieved notable progress. Since 2010, there has been a nearly 50% decrease in veterans experiencing homelessness. That represents approximately 37,000 people on any given night who lacked a long-term home and now have one. This is significant, but it is by no means a time to take our foot off the gas. The 2020 [Annual Homeless Assessment Report](#) revealed a rise in the number of veterans experiencing homelessness. Although the rise was slight, 0.45% to be exact, there are still more than 37,000 men and women experiencing homelessness who put their lives on the line to serve our nation – a nation that has failed to help them attain the basic need of housing. This is unacceptable. To achieve our goal of ending veteran homelessness, any increase in this number must be treated with concern and action.

Our Essential Strategies Driving Progress

USICH uses a multi-pronged strategy to ending homelessness, including veteran homelessness. It consists of:

- **Building closer partnerships** between federal agencies and state and local governments.
- **Defining what it means to end homelessness** to provide clear goals to focus efforts and resources.
- **Setting ambitious goals** and asking state and local leaders to publicly commit to them through initiatives like The Mayors Challenge.

- **Housing First** – Removing obstacles to help people access housing as quickly as possible so they can achieve other goals and improve other outcomes related to employment, education, health, and safety.
- **Supportive Housing** – Prioritizing people with the greatest needs and high-cost users of emergency care and public systems.
- **Rapid Re-Housing** – Providing people who just need a hand up with short-term rental assistance and support services in order to re-stabilize their housing situation.

Our Criteria and Benchmarks to End Veteran Homelessness

Ending veteran homelessness requires the participation of all levels and parts of government. USICH, the Department of Housing and Urban Development, and the Department of Veterans Affairs have developed [specific criteria and benchmarks](#) to help states and local governments end veteran homelessness.

While the criteria focus on describing essential elements of the community's response system, the benchmarks serve as important indicators of whether and how effectively that system is working on an ongoing basis. Together, these criteria and benchmarks are intended to help communities drive down the number of veterans experiencing homelessness to as close to zero as possible, while building systems that support lasting solutions that can effectively and efficiently respond to future needs.

As of today, [82 communities and 3 states](#) have effectively ended veteran homelessness. The most recent communities to achieve this goal are Chittenden County, Vt.; the Quad Cities in Illinois and Iowa; a region in Indiana (Balance of State Region 5); and Minnesota's Suburban Metro Area Continuum of Care, which includes the counties of Dakota, Anoka, Washington, Scott, and Carver.

Our Workgroups and Initiatives

We have several interagency workgroups and initiatives focused on ending veteran homelessness. They include:

- **The Mayors Challenge to End Veteran Homelessness:** This is a call to action for all mayors and other state and local leaders to publicly commit to making sure that every veteran who served America has a home. Through the Mayors Challenge to End Veteran Homelessness, public officials across the country marshal federal, local, and nonprofit efforts to end veteran homelessness in their communities.
- **Strategic Decision Coordination Team (SDCT):** The purpose of SDCT is to enable VA, HUD, and USICH to optimally execute joint activities necessary for the goal of preventing and ending veteran homelessness. That means ensuring interagency activities are implemented efficiently, effectively, and with the appropriate stakeholders through greater coordination between the agencies, creation of formal mechanisms for collaboration, specific goal setting, identification of policy and technical assistance gaps, clear and consistent communication of activities and accomplishments, and promotion of shared responsibility for a common goal. The collaborative structure is not intended to transform each agency's individual responsibilities into a single joint effort.
- **Quarterly Technical Assistance Coordination:** USICH convenes quarterly meetings with the departments of Housing and Urban Development, Labor, and Veterans Affairs to coordinate technical assistance for providers and national partners; to provide guidance on the criteria and benchmarks; to exchange innovative practices in communities, and to align messaging.
- **HUD-VASH Utilization:** USICH convenes a time-limited team of HUD and VA partners to coordinate interviews with key communities to identify and analyze opportunities and strategies to generate policy/practice options to improve and strengthen the use of HUD-VA Supportive Housing (HUD-VASH).
- **VA Secretary's Advisory Committee on Veteran Homelessness:** USICH serves as an Ex-Officio member of this committee and regularly attends and participates in meetings. The role of the committee is to provide advice to the Secretary of Veterans Affairs on benefits and services for veterans experiencing homelessness. The

committee submits an annual report to the VA Secretary with recommendations based on feedback from subject matter experts and veterans with lived experience in an effort to improve VA's services for veterans experiencing homelessness.

Our Role in Pandemic Relief

The pandemic has presented communities with added urgency. People experiencing homelessness are at a high risk of contracting and dying from coronavirus. Initially, communities were focused on creating enough space in emergency shelters to practice social distancing, which they often did through the use of hotels and motels. The current focus is on vaccinating the homeless population, securing permanent housing for them, and building relationships with local health departments to improve their access to health care.

USICH has provided a wide range of technical assistance regarding the coronavirus crisis to federal, state, and local stakeholders during the pandemic. We disseminated guidance through [our website](#) and emails. We hosted a series of webinars for state and local officials focused on real-time lessons learned from Seattle, Los Angeles, Detroit, New Orleans, Miami and many more places. USICH worked with the IRS to identify mechanisms to ensure that people experiencing homelessness could access their Economic Impact Payments, and we trained people in communities to enforce those mechanisms. We held virtual meetings to create a space to connect emergency shelter providers with federal agencies so they could discuss the current federal guidance and share their challenges. We worked with the Department of Homeland Security's Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency to formally include language on homelessness services in *Updated Memorandum on Identification of Essential Critical Infrastructure Workers during COVID-19 Response*.

USICH also plans to publish guidance on the American Rescue Plan's provisions that impact people experiencing homelessness.

Conclusion

I've mentioned a lot of numbers today, but it's important to never lose sight of the faces behind them. Every statistic represents a person – someone's son, daughter, father, mother, brother, sister – and their unique story. We know that many people have fallen into homelessness under similar circumstances, and yes, data helps us devise and implement strategies to pull people

out of it, but no two experiences are identical. It is essential to learn about each individual's struggles and dreams.

Through their work, veterans have given Americans the opportunity to dream. We owe it to them to provide them with the human right of housing. Ending veteran homelessness requires the collaboration of all levels and parts of government, and the U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness exists to coordinate that work. We know that with a collaborative, compassionate, and evidence-based approach, it is possible to end veteran homelessness.

We also know that by ending veteran homelessness, we can end all homelessness. The approach we've used to help veterans can help all Americans. Our veterans deserve our best, and we are grateful to be one part of an effort that helps them achieve the American dream: a place to call home.