

Statement for House Committee on Veterans' Affairs Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity, "Veteran Homelessness in the Wake of COVID-19"

Introduction

Good morning. Representative Levin, Representative Moore, members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify on the work we do with Veterans facing homelessness. My name is Lula Skowronek, and I am the Program Director of Priority Veteran, a program of United Way of Central Alabama.

Priority Veteran started in 2013 with a Supportive Services for Veteran Families (SSVF) grant from the VA. Since then, we have served over 3,500 Veterans across Alabama by providing case management, supportive services, and temporary financial assistance.

Impact of COVID-19 & What Works Well

COVID-19 forced us to change our entire service model. Priority Veteran and other SSVF grantees were called to action by John Kuhn, National SSVF Program Director, who emphasized we should do whatever it takes to ensure no Veteran is on the streets during this pandemic.

SSVF recognized homeless Veterans were at high risk for COVID-19. The shelters our clients previously relied on were no longer safe. In response, SSVF expanded our ability to place Veterans in hotels as an emergency housing option while awaiting permanent housing. Since March 2020, Priority Veteran has placed 170 Veterans families in hotels; at the peak, we had 67 Veterans in hotels all over the state; only 6 remain in hotels today.

Priority Veteran had several clients in hotels with no income, no transportation, and therefore no access to food. Through expanded SSVF guidance and a creative partnership with a local catering company, Priority Veteran provided 1,370 meals to Veterans in hotels.

The pandemic created not only a public health emergency but also an economic crisis. 32% of Veteran families we served during the pandemic were facing eviction. Many owed thousands of dollars in back rent and utilities. Because SSVF increased grant funding and lifted caps on the amount and length of financial assistance that could be provided to clients, Priority Veteran was better able to keep Veterans in their homes.

Priority Veteran works closely with the VA medical centers and HUD-VASH teams in our area, and the pandemic only strengthened these partnerships. We now often work in tandem with a Veteran while they are in a hotel and searching for housing with a HUD-VASH voucher. Also, this January, the Birmingham VA and United Way of Central Alabama launched a Veterans vaccine clinic, and to-date, nearly 50,000 vaccines have been provided.

Challenges & Recommendations

Even with increased SSVF funding, Priority Veteran clients face ongoing challenges, including a lack of affordable housing and high rent.

Most landlords are unwilling to house a Veteran with poor credit, criminal history, or past eviction. When SSVF expanded our ability to place Veterans in hotels, it became apparent how many were already using extended stay hotels as their primary residence—not because they didn't have income, but because they couldn't find a landlord willing to rent to them.

Lack of mental health care is another challenge. As we placed more Veterans in hotels, it became clear that mental illness made it difficult for many to live alone in a hotel room, leaving them without a safe option.

Priority Veteran was excited to learn that HUD-VASH will extend eligibility to Veterans with an “Other than Honorable” discharge status, and about the country-wide expansion of the Shallow Subsidy program. These changes will create long-term stability for Veterans who have fallen in and out of homelessness.

Success Story

“Charlie” is an example of a challenging, but ultimately successful case. He served in the Army in 1985 for only a few months and lived on the streets for two years before receiving help because he assumed he did not qualify for any Veterans programs. With access to the VA SQUARES portal, we quickly determined his SSVF eligibility. Previously, Charlie would not stay in shelters due to his anxiety, but he did feel comfortable in a hotel room. Charlie stayed in a hotel for 17 weeks while we worked with a Permanent Supportive Housing provider to secure an apartment. Without that extended hotel stay, it is unlikely Charlie would be stably housed today.

Conclusion

I am amazed how local programs and government agencies have risen to the occasion and made changes to ensure our most vulnerable heroes have a safe, stable place to call home. I am incredibly proud of the work Priority Veteran does and am honored to have the opportunity to speak with you. Thank you.