

**Testimony of Akilah Templeton, President and CEO Veterans Village of San Diego before the Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity, House Committee on Veterans' Affairs on "Veteran Homelessness in the Wake of COVID-19" – June 16, 2021**

Greeting Chairmen Levin and Ranking Member Moore. Thank you for the opportunity to address the committee on the topic "Veteran Homelessness in the Wake of COVID-19."

My name is Akilah Templeton, and I am the President and CEO of Veterans Village of San Diego in San Diego California. Veterans Village of San Diego provides a complete continuum of care that includes outreach, assessment, transitional housing, case management, mental health, and substance use treatment, vocational support, financial help, permanent housing, and outpatient treatment to veterans, homeless veterans, and their families. We are the proud founders of the veteran Stand Down and in September we will celebrate 40 years as the lead veteran service organization in our region. We run the largest Grant and Per Diem program in San Diego and offer the only VA-funded veteran-specific mental health and substance use treatment beds in the entire County.

Today I humbly address you, not only as a leader in the fight to end veteran homelessness but also as a COVID-19 survivor. I share this because I believe it provides some perspective and some insight into what it has been like for all of us since COVID-19 made its appearance in the United States. We have been both in line and on the front line throughout this entire ordeal. We have provided help while also needing help to manage our own lives. Today I want to talk about the heart and soul of our industry and how this virus has helped us to come together in ways before unimagined to respond to a very real crisis. I want to talk about the impact of COVID-19 on homeless veterans, and also the bravery and fortitude required to care for them. I want to tell you what I saw, what we did, and what we need to do going forward.

COVID-19 has forever changed my opinion about what is possible in the veteran service space. I know with absolute certainty that we can solve the problem of veteran homelessness if we choose to approach it with the same sense of urgency used to respond to the virus. Our response to COVID required that we think outside of the box, act quickly, take risks, and put our differences aside. We had one goal: to beat COVID before it beat us. At the local level, I saw collaboration unlike any I have ever seen. There was and remains a willingness to support one another. I saw flexibility at the state, county, and city levels. I saw elected officials and government agencies that listened to providers and worked with them to coordinate the response. I heard yes more than I heard no. We worked together to fight a common enemy and we were willing to try anything if it meant saving lives and keeping people safe. We looked past red tape and bureaucracy and focused on solutions, for once. From onsite testing events to massive food drives and everything in between, we got it done.

At the Federal level, you responded with legislation that gave us the resources needed to maximize our efforts, reduce risks, and save more lives. With help from the CARES Act, we

brought more veterans in from the street and fought harder to keep up with the large numbers of veterans entering homelessness for the first time. We were able to place homeless veterans with advanced age and pre-existing conditions into non-congregate living settings like hotels. We were able to help veterans at risk for becoming homeless keep up with monthly rent payments and household expenses. CARES act funding meant that for the first time, we could be compensated at the per diem rate required to provide the best possible care to veterans living in our transitional and emergency housing programs. It meant that we could provide PPE to our workers and the veterans we served. We could purchase equipment to sanitize our facilities and we could invest in 21<sup>st</sup> Century technology so that telehealth services were readily available to the people we served. We could take better care of the people we served and our employees.

COVID-19, though devastating and crippling, proved that we can put our money, time, and effort where it matters when we agree that a problem is worth solving. Earlier I mentioned that I had been diagnosed with COVID 19. Many of our employees were also diagnosed. Henry Geiger, a driver in our transitional housing program lost his life to COVID but had shown up to work every day in the weeks leading up to his diagnosis. I need you to know that there were people on the ground who showed up to zoom meetings even after being diagnosed. They worked from home while isolated. Employees that were not diagnosed continued to show up even though they were at risk. They showed up even though they had friends and family members and coworkers who were dying. They were helpless and afraid in many instances, but they never wavered. They continued to show up for our veterans. That is how much we care about what we do. That is how we have shown our commitment and dedication to the people we serve.

We do not control the purse strings that fund our programs, and we do not vote on the legislation that can give us what we need to do our jobs; all we can do is show up. That is what we ask of you. Show up. Give your all. Work across the aisle. Work together to keep the momentum going even as the threat of the virus diminishes. When COVID fades away there will still be homeless veterans and that is unacceptable. Soon COVID will no longer be a threat, but I submit to you that poverty is and will continue to be a public health crisis that puts millions at risk annually. Homelessness is a public health crisis. Veteran Homelessness is both a public health crisis and our greatest shame.

Where do we go from here? I need you to understand that non-profit veteran service organizations offer a valuable service, not just to their local communities, but to this country. We serve the most vulnerable in society. In our own way, we are providing access to the American dream by restoring the one ingredient necessary to obtain it, HOPE. The American Rescue Plan Act and the 17 billion dollars set aside to support veterans is a step in the right direction and we thank you for that. Used wisely, these funds have the potential to help us to course correct, get back on track, and set many veterans up for success.

Going forward we want you to continue to pay Grant and Per Diem providers daily rates that make sense. We cannot do it for 50 dollars a day. We just can't. The Grant and Per Diem Waiver

has given us room to breathe during this crisis and we thank you. We want you to intentionally advance a framework for equity and justice as funds are made available to bring us out of the pandemic. We know that veterans from minority groups are overrepresented when it comes to homelessness, disparate treatment in healthcare, and unemployment. We can do better. We want you to think about the lasting effects of the virus and the collective trauma we have all experienced. We can assume that there will be a need for ongoing healthcare and mental health treatment for many of our veterans, for years to come. Lastly, we expect an ongoing response to veteran homelessness that resembles the response to COVID. We have miles to go before we can claim victory over the virus, but we are getting there. The last year has shown that as a nation, we can adequately address problems when we see them as problems that are worth solving. Veteran homelessness is a problem worth solving. Thank you for your time.