



Testimony of the

NATIONAL COALITION
for **HOMELESS VETERANS**

House of Representatives
Committee on Veterans' Affairs
Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity

Hearing on Pending Legislation

September 21, 2021

Chairman Levin, Ranking Member Moore, and distinguished Members of the Committee on Veterans' Affairs Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity:

On behalf of our Board of Directors and Members across the country, thank you for the opportunity to share the views of the National Coalition for Homeless Veterans (NCHV) with you. NCHV is the resource and technical assistance center for a national network of community-based service providers and local, state and federal agencies that provide emergency, transitional, and supportive housing, food, health services, job training and placement assistance, legal aid and case management support for thousands of homeless, at-risk, and formerly homeless veterans each year. We are committed to working with our network and partners across the country to end homelessness among veterans.

We thank you for your leadership and ongoing efforts to focus on the needs of veterans experiencing or at-risk of homelessness. Congress has already enacted COVID relief legislation in the form of the Families First Coronavirus Response Act, the Coronavirus Aid, relief, and Economic Security or CARES Act, the National Defense Authorization Act or NDAA, the Johnny Isakson and David P. Roe, M.D. Veterans Health Care and Benefits Improvement Act of 2020 or Isakson/Roe, and most recently the American Rescue Plan (ARP). The assistance Congress provided has resulted in VA's flexibility to apply \$971 million in supplemental resources in Fiscal Year (FY) 2021, and \$485 million so far from the ARP for FY' 2022. This emergency aid is being distributed to organizations across the country to keep veterans safe from COVID by decongesting shelter spaces, ramping up rapid rehousing capacity, and focusing on individualized housing options in hotels and motels. Congressional support afforded VA the ability to hold the line and mitigate increases in the number of homeless veterans during the pandemic. Yet we must not lose focus and look toward making progress in lowering the overall number of veterans with unstable housing even as federal foreclosure and eviction moratoria have sunset.

While veteran homelessness decreased by 50% between 2010 and 2020, HUD's 2020 Point-in-Time Count data showed the first slight uptick in veteran homelessness in recent years. Long-term progress has been due in large part to Congressional investment in key Federal Programs, adherence to evidence-based solutions, and dedicated coordination at the national and local level. Veteran homelessness is once again a priority at the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and at HUD and it has become clear that we must reinvest in ongoing efforts to end homelessness, while simultaneously recalibrating to respond to the urgent economic crisis COVID has created and the inequities that certain veteran groups face. Homelessness is an intersectional challenge that has as many paths in as it does out. As such, a variety of tools are required to respond to individual crises and needs.

Today's hearing is a testament to this Committee's continuing ability to proactively look for those tools and new opportunities to better serve veterans. As the Secretary has stated regarding homelessness, VA cannot simply proceed doing the same thing and expecting different results.

With so many worthy proposals I will limit NCHV's feedback to those legislative proposals that directly impact the state of veteran homelessness.

I. (Discussion Draft) Adjustments of Grants Awarded by the Secretary of Veterans Affairs for Comprehensive Service Programs to Serve Homeless Veterans

NCHV Supports - Pandemic response required a modification toward individualized transitional housing over congregate housing to provide a safer, healthier environment for veterans. H.R. 7105, The Johnny Isakson and David P. Roe, M.D. Veterans Health Care and Benefits Improvement Act of 2020, P.L. 116-315 made these vital updates to capital grant regulations. These grants will pay for organizations providing services to make this transition, but only for the duration of the pandemic.

- Unless made permanent, previous, current, and future grantees will be burdened and discouraged from pursuing the best possible facilities for serving our nation's veterans.
- To incentivize and expedite making this move, matching funds will not be required for newly awarded grants for a minimum of the next five years, eliminating the need for organizations to secure last minute funding.
- This language also permanently removes the punitive real property disposition policy, which currently requires organizations to buy their own property back from VA if their communities' needs change in the future.

II. (Discussion Draft) Pilot Program on Grants for Health Care for Homeless Veterans.

NCHV Supports - This pilot would provide stable housing and appropriate medical care for veterans with medical needs while they await placement in long-term care.

- Service Providers do not currently have the staff or capabilities necessary to offer the intensity of care for these veterans who have nowhere else to stay while they wait, sometimes years, to access permanent housing with long-term care. Consequently, these veterans frequently bounce between transitional housing that is not equipped to house them, the hospital, and the street.
- These organizations would be able to hire onsite health care professionals to provide care for veterans who require round-the-clock assistance and medical staff, such as those living with severe dementia or Alzheimer's, while they wait for appropriate permanent housing.
- This language crafts a tool to end that cycle and provide stability to these veterans and we hope that language suggesting no fewer than 5 locations be interpreted generously, with five as the floor.
 - i. Requires VA to establish a five-site, five-year pilot program through which organizations providing transitional housing to veterans can apply for grants to fund hiring of on-site medical professionals and their supplies.

- ii. Requires VA to collect information from recipients and submit a report to Congress with demographic data on the veterans served and the status of their access to health care and long-term housing.

III. (Discussion Draft) **Pilot Program on Award of Grants for Substance Use Disorder Recovery for Homeless Veterans.**

NCHV Supports - This pilot program increases homeless veterans' access to substance-use disorder recovery programs in the community.

- There exists a significant access shortage for substance use disorder recovery programs for veterans, especially those experiencing homelessness. There is significant correlation between substance-use disorder, chronic homelessness, and mental illness.
- This language would establish a pilot grant program for community substance use recovery programs for unhoused veterans with preference given to programs assisting veterans who face barriers in accessing those services from VA
 - i. Requires VA to establish a five-site, five-year pilot program providing grants to substance use disorder recovery programs in the community for those programs to provide their services to veterans who are homeless, were previously homeless and are transitioning to permanent housing, or are at risk of becoming homeless.
 - ii. Requires VA to submit regular reports to Congress on services provided, data on veterans served, and success of the program.

IV. (Discussion Draft) **Training and Technical Assistance Provided by Secretary of Veterans Affairs to Recipients of Certain Financial Assistance.**

NCHV Supports - VA provides technical assistance to programs that provide shelter for unhoused veterans primarily during the grant application process. Funding for this support has not increased alongside the significant growth of these programs since they were established.

- These grantees would greatly benefit from guidance in operating their programs after the grant has been awarded, but there is currently not adequate funding to provide this service.
- This legislation would remove the current cap on technical assistance spending for these programs to ensure the grantees are receiving the best support possible.
 - i. Removes the existing \$750,000 cap on funds for this support for the SSVF program.
 - ii. Codifies the training and technical assistance provision for the GPD program without a cap on use of funds.

V. (Discussion Draft) **Adjustments to Rate of Per Diem Payments Provided by the Secretary of Veterans Affairs for Services Furnished to Homeless Veterans.**

NCHV Supports - The Johnny Isakson and David P. Roe, M.D. Veterans Health Care and Benefits Improvement Act of 2020, P.L. 116-315, raised Grant and Per Diem (GPD) program rates for providing transitional housing to unhoused veterans to 115% of the standard rate. This increase, while appropriate, was not nearly adequate for these grantees to successfully serve all of our nation's veterans.

- Due to pandemic flexibilities, the current maximum is 300%. Using VA's own data from May 2021, less than one in five regions' grantees are operating within the 115% threshold, whereas more than half are operating within the 200% maximum.
- Requests for these increases date back to well before the pandemic as cost of living and affordable housing shortages increase nationwide. Many grantees also need more space and safer, more individualized space for transitional housing, but they do not apply for capital grants that would help fund expansion, because they would not be able to afford to staff the additional space without increased GPD rates.
- This legislation will bring this program much closer to being able to provide transitional housing for all eligible veterans nationwide until permanent housing can be secured.

VI. (Discussion Draft) **Report on Shallow Subsidy Program Under the Supportive Services for Veteran Families Program.**

NCHV Supports - The Department of Veterans Affairs provides increased funding for transitional housing grantees in certain areas around the country that have exceptionally high costs of living.

- VA has been testing a shallow subsidy program which increases funding to SSVF programs by up to 35% in certain regions with high costs of living.
- The program has been lauded as successful and instrumental in better serving veterans and has recently been expanded to communities nationwide which necessitates additional study.
- This language would direct VA to study the effectiveness of the program, its impact during the pandemic, and how it might inform ending the chronic cycles of homelessness and be replicated in civilian populations.

VII. (Discussion Draft) **Pilot Program on Grants to Improve Public Transportation Services for Veterans.**

- NCHV Supports - One of the most prominent difficulties veterans struggling with housing face is access to transportation, not just to reach VA facilities, but also to reach places of employment, grocery stores, and other resources. There are many areas where public transportation is available, but does not connect to veteran facilities, thereby perpetuating barriers for veterans experiencing homelessness who may not have a car or gas funds to access basic needs.

- The pilot expands public transportation for veterans to access mental health care, medical treatment, job services, and other essential needs for at least five sites.
- This language requires VA to establish a five-year pilot grant program to provide funding to state, county, tribal, and city governments to expand, establish, or retain public transportation access to facilities that serve veterans.
- Includes both VA facilities and those facilities that receive VA funding such as those providing housing or shelter to veterans.

VIII. **H.R. 5025** – Rep. Joe Neguse, to amend title 38, United States Code, to **Increase and Extend the Authorization of Appropriations for Homeless Veterans Reintegration Programs.**

NCHV Supports - The Homeless Veterans Reintegration Program (HVRP) helps unhoused veterans access long-term, meaningful employment and is key to ending chronic homelessness. The program is currently expanding into states where services are lacking, and it pairs well with SSVF’s shallow subsidy program that just went nationwide.

- As of June 30th, 2020 HVRP had a 63.2% placement rate with Jobs paying an average of \$15.18
- The language increases the program’s authorization to \$75 million from \$50 million to expand to states lacking the program and to complement the expansion of SSVF’s shallow subsidy with which it has paired so well.
- Extends the authorization for an additional three years from 2022 to 2025.

Additional Active Legislation

Regarding NCHV’s position on other pertinent and timely legislation not under consideration today:

- NCHV supports language in Title XII of the House Budget reconciliation bill. Section 12002 modifies the enhanced-use lease (EUL) authority of Department of Veterans Affairs and appropriates \$455 million for fiscal year 2022 while extending the program from December 31st, 2023, to September 30th, 2026. NCHV does have some concerns with possible interpretations of modifications allowing for services “indirectly” benefiting veterans. We would like to see future legislation making additional program adjustments like allowing for leases to extend from 75-year cap to a maximum of 99 years to help with developer cost amortization and allowing for use of funds for utility construction.
- NCHV supports language in Title IV of the House Budget reconciliation bill. The House Financial Services Committee voted on September 14 to approve legislation to invest \$327 billion in affordable housing through the Build Back Better Act. The bill includes \$90 billion for rental assistance, including \$75 billion for Housing Choice Vouchers and

\$15 billion for Project-Based Rental Assistance. Of the total amount provided, \$48.46 billion is for tenant-based rental assistance for extremely low-income households, \$24 billion is for rental assistance for households experiencing or at risk of homelessness, and other populations further supplementing funding for veterans who are experiencing or at-risk of homelessness.

- NCHV supports this year's National Defense Authorization Act, H.R. 4350 as amended in the U.S. House by Representative Green of Texas. The amendment creates Section 5106, Which would have PHAs include veterans in consolidated plans and would also require annual reporting by Secretary of HUD on housing assistance to veterans. NCHV supports this amendment and the overall intent of its language. There is a general dearth of data in this area regarding veterans. Needs are currently estimated for individuals with HIV/Aids, mental health issues, those with disabilities, domestic violence survivors, and elderly, but not this cross cutting sub-population.
- NCHV also supports Representative Cori Bush's Eviction Protection Act of 2021. Letters have been circulating on the hill from over 60 representatives to leadership requesting such a legislative fix. The CDC's eviction moratorium lifted briefly between August 1st and 3rd. The administration claimed it was legally constrained by the Supreme Court threatening to overturn any further federal moratoria, so they deferred to Congress, states, and localities to continue or begin imposing their own eviction and foreclosure moratoria. Both the eviction and foreclosure moratoria have either expired or been invalidated. The Supreme Court ruled 6-3 on August 26th to end the temporary stay on a lower court ruling seeking to overturn the federal eviction moratorium issued by the CDC, invalidating the federal eviction moratorium.

In Summation

Thank you for the opportunity to submit this testimony and for the Committee's continued interest in ending veteran homelessness. It is a privilege to work with all of you to ensure that every veteran facing a housing crisis has access to safe, decent, and affordable housing paired with the support services needed to remain stably housed. We remain in an emergency and veterans experiencing and at-risk of homelessness need safe housing now more than ever. NCHV thanks you for your attention as we work collectively to lessen the impact that COVID-19 will have on veterans experiencing or at-risk of homelessness.