



**To: Committee on Veterans' Affairs Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity**

***May 4, 2023 Field Hearing: All Hands on Deck: Ending Veteran Homelessness in San Diego***  
*Greg Anglea, Interfaith Community Services CEO, Testimonial*

### **Introduction**

Today, we can honestly say that ending Veteran homelessness is possible. We can say that empirically, because as a nation since 2010 we have decreased Veteran homelessness more than 55%. This progress included an 11% decrease between 2020 and 2022, demonstrating that even among the challenges of pandemic, ending Veteran homelessness is possible.

Two factors are primarily responsible for these successes:

- 1) **Increased investment** from the Federal government in housing solutions and supportive services for Veterans experiencing and at-risk of experiencing homelessness
- 2) **Strong coordination and partnership** within the Federal government (especially the VA & HUD), with State and local government at all levels, community-based organizations, Veterans groups, business leaders, philanthropy, and faith communities.

San Diego County has exemplified the positive outcomes of these factors, realizing a more 30% decrease in Veteran homelessness over the past four years. Recent and ongoing commitments from our Congressional Representatives, the County of San Diego, the San Diego Regional Taskforce on Homelessness, and a large network of Veteran-serving community-based organizations will build on these strengths and drive San Diego toward ending Veteran homelessness.

Despite these strengths and the positive progress we have realized, significant challenges remain. Veterans need additional Congressional support to end Veteran homelessness in San Diego, and to support similar efforts in communities throughout the United States.

### **Interfaith Community Services' Role in Ending Veteran Homelessness**

Interfaith Community Services (Interfaith) operates more than 75 diverse but complimentary programs addressing poverty, inequities, and homelessness throughout San Diego County, with an emphasis on North San Diego County. Last year we provided services to 19,175 people, ***including 786 Veterans.***

Interfaith operates the following programs exclusively for Veterans:

- Post-Hospitalization Recuperative Care for Veterans

- 16-bed contract with VA for Veterans with VA Healthcare Benefits who are discharging from local hospitals (including VA Medical Center), and in need of both housing and medical respite care
- VA Grant Per Diem Transitional Housing for Veterans
  - 64-beds of community-based Service Intensive Transitional Housing as well as Bridge Housing Grant Per Diem VA-funded Transitional Housing
- Equity Target Populations Fund Employment Training Program for Veterans
  - State California Employment Development Department (via Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act Governor's Discretionary funds) grant to provide workforce training for Veterans
- Veterans Housing Stability
  - Privately funded case management and homeless prevention rental assistance for Veterans at-risk of homelessness
- Veterans Behavioral Health
  - Privately funded behavioral health clinicians to address Veteran mental health needs pre/post entry into existing Interfaith Veterans programs

### **Strengths, Challenges, and Opportunities for Congressional Action**

#### **1) VA Grant Per Diem (GPD) Transitional Housing**

Nationwide, GPD programs housed more than 10,000 Veterans in 2022, with the ***VA reporting that GPD providers are demonstrating some of the highest performance outcomes in GPD history.***

This is a direct result of the two primary factors cited above:

- 1) **Increased investment** by the Federal government in Veterans in the GPD program
- 2) **Strong partnership** and coordination between government, GPD service providers, and key community stakeholders

The increased investment in Veterans via GPD was the result of COVID public health regulations which will sunset May 11, 2023. This will reduce the maximum per diem rate for a GPD provider from \$152.73 to just \$64.52. In high-cost communities like San Diego, \$64.52 per bed night does not support the cost of emergency shelter, and it certainly will not cover the cost of proven effective and critically needed, service-intensive GPD Transitional Housing programs serving the complex needs of Veterans experiencing homelessness.

To demonstrate the severity of these challenges, we would like to share the following stories of Veterans Interfaith has been able to effectively serve this past year as a result of increased GPD reimbursement rates (names have been changed):

*Rick Jones, USMC Vietnam Veteran. Mr. Jones was living in his car when coming to Interfaith, after his wife died from an accident and his daughter died in that same week from a heart attack. He was drinking alcohol daily, and attempted suicide before coming to the GPD program. In GPD he received support from case management, participated in*

*an active recovery group, and engaged in behavioral health counselling. He stabilized his mental health, was taken off the suicide prevention list, and stopped drinking alcohol daily. He completed steps to ensure his financial stability, and was able to save \$9,000 while in the program.*

*Tim Martin, Navy Veteran. Mr. Martin came to Interfaith about being attacked while sleeping in a park. He has a Traumatic Brain Injury, memory problems, and substance use disorder. He had problems budgeting his money, using appropriate social skills, and remembering his appointments. While at Interfaith's GPD program he was able to attend his doctor appointments, learn budgeting skills in order to be able to pay his rent, and improve his social skills. While at the program he attended case management, active recovery group, and life skills. Mr. Martin has displayed a need for continued case management, so Interfaith has helped him apply and gain acceptance into the HUD-VASH program. He recently passed an interview for an apartment application and will be moving in soon to his new home.*

*Vanessa Smith, Army Veteran. Ms. Smith has a long history of abuse and trauma from people close to her, including her family. She suffers from physical, mental health, and substance abuse related issues. Interfaith's GPD has provided a safe haven for Ms. Smith to heal and recover. She entered without housing, traumatized, unemployed, and with significant debt. Through case management support, therapy, and Veterans Treatment Court, Ms. Smith has completed her education, found stable employment, paid off her debt, and learned to use the supportive resources to establish her independence.*

**Dignified and safe housing which provides professional, Veteran-centered support services to address trauma, physical problems, mental health, and addiction, cannot be provided for \$64.52 per day in a community like San Diego.**

The success of more than 10,000 Veterans served throughout our nation in 2022 in the GPD program, supported by a funding reimbursement rate commensurate with the actual cost of providing these services, have proven that we have the resources and strategies to overcome the most challenging of situations for Veterans who have served our country.

**Opportunity for Congressional Action:** As a GPD provider facing the funding cliff May 12, 2023 will bring, we emphatically **support and advocate for passage of HR 491 – Return Home to Housing Act**, which would increase the maximum rate of per diem payments provided by the VA.

## **2) Homeless Prevention**

The VA's Supportive Services for Veteran Families provides a small amount of homeless prevention rental assistance, which in practice does not meet community need. Veterans and Veteran families proactively reach out to providers like Interfaith seeking to maintain their housing, but we often do not have the resources to prevent them from becoming homeless.

In San Diego County the Regional Taskforce on the Homelessness Homeless Management Information System reports that over a 12-month period, for every 10 persons who overcome homelessness 13 people became homeless for the first time. We cannot end Veteran homelessness in San Diego or in other communities unless we can do a better job of preventing more Veterans from becoming homeless in the first place. Interfaith currently addresses this need through limited amounts of donations from foundations, individual donors, and faith communities. That resource cannot scale up to meet societal need among Veterans. Additional Federal investment is needed.

**Opportunity for Congressional Action:** Support increased homeless prevention rental assistance funding, which will leverage existing VA investments, and reduce longer-term need for homeless-focused housing and service interventions.

### **3) Supportive Housing for Medically Fragile Veterans**

The VA's Healthcare for Homeless Veterans (HCHV) program supports critical functions nationwide for medically fragile Veterans:

- Outreach Services
- Case Management Services
- Contract Residential Service Programs

Interfaith currently operates a 32-bed post-hospitalization Recuperative Care program, which includes a 16-bed HCHV contract for Veterans being discharged from local hospitals. Interfaith has leveraged the success of this program to secure a \$9MM investment from the County of San Diego and \$5MM of private donations to purchase and renovate former motel site in Escondido, CA which will open in May 2023 as the 106-bed Abraham & Lillian Turk Recuperative Care Center.

Interfaith programs serving medically fragile, often older Veterans, also heavily refer to and utilize local CalVets Veteran Homes in San Diego (Chula Vista) and Barstow, which provide an array of long-term supportive housing options, including memory care and assisted living.

HUD-VASH provides critically needed permanent supportive housing, though there are a growing number of Veterans who require greater levels of support than most stand-alone, community-based, HUD-VASH housing provides. Additionally, there are not enough safe, dignified housing units locally for Veterans who have secured a HUD-VASH voucher.

#### **Opportunity for Congressional Action:**

- Explore additional HCHV opportunities to leverage growing intersection between health and homelessness to increase Contracted Residential Services Programs for medically fragile Veterans, also strengthening Outreach Services to better utilize existing VA and civilian resources which can benefit medically fragile Veterans
- Support the creation of additional Veteran Homes for older and/or medically fragile Veterans, building off the success of CalVets Veterans Homes

- Provide longer term substance use disorder treatment programs geared toward Veterans

## **Conclusion**

The Federal Government and its partners throughout the nation have proven that ending Veteran homelessness is not only possible, but in communities like San Diego it is well within our grasp in the months and years ahead. Congress has the opportunity to build on the successes of the VA GPD program, Homeless Prevention, and Healthcare for Homeless Veterans. Doing so will support an end to Veteran Homelessness not just in San Diego County, but in communities throughout the United States.

I will close with words from a Veteran Interfaith has had the honor of serving, and who has found success through both the GPD program and Veterans Treatment Court:

*When I took off my uniform, I believed that my service had ended. The way that it ended is something that I have struggled with every day since. I remained in isolation believing my service had been dishonorable. I had not been able to reconcile my sense of duty and love for my country with this assumption. What I know now is that although I have taken off my uniform my service has not ended. What I will not do is take for granted those who have fallen and been lost to the wars within by giving up or retreating in isolation. I will honor them by continuing to serve to the best of my ability and all of the capacities for which I am most suited.*

*What I will not do is fall prey to the belief that I can find an easy way or quick fix. I will not turn to any substance or any other person to fill empty spaces within. I will not allow a bad day accumulate into bad weeks or months or years. I will not allow one person's disapproval or rejection of me convince me that it is a representation of the entire world viewpoint of me. I will not let one mistake represent total failure. I will not let one bad mood trick me into relapse. I will show myself grace and fill empty space with routine, consistency and accountability. I will soldier on.*

*Going back to school, getting a degree in criminal justice, starting as a paralegal, and allowing myself to find where I can be most effective in ensuring that no one is ever left behind; that is my path.*

Thank you for your time today, for inviting Interfaith to share our experiences and expertise helping Veterans and Veteran families overcome homelessness. We look forward to and offer anything that Interfaith Community Services can do to help this committee in your work.