

Statement of David Estrella
Director, County of San Diego, Health and Human Services Agency, Housing and Community Development Services before the Committee on Veterans' Affairs Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity, US House of Representatives

May 5, 2023

Good afternoon, Chairman Van Orden, Ranking Member Levin, and members of the committee. Welcome to the County of San Diego. My name is David Estrella, and I am the Director of the County of San Diego's Health and Human Services Agency - Housing and Community Development Services. As such, I am also representing the Housing Authority of the County of San Diego.

San Diego County is a proud military community. San Diego has the largest concentration of military and veteran presence in the world with approximately 120,000 active-duty personnel, and over 230,000 veteran residents. The majority of our active-duty service members are split roughly evenly between the Navy and the Marine Corps, serving among our eight military bases in the County. The region has long been defined by its military presence, however the connection extends past active-duty service, resulting in military and veterans and their family members accounting for approximately 35 percent of the entire San Diego population.

According to the Regional Task Force on Homelessness (RTFH), there are nearly 1,000 Veterans currently experiencing homelessness in the region. Over the last several years, the San Diego County Board of Supervisors (Board) has demonstrated its commitment to addressing the needs of all people experiencing and at-risk of homelessness. The Board adopted the County's Framework for Ending Homelessness in 2021 which created a unified strategic approach to support the coordination of homeless services and funding. On February 7, 2023, the Board formally prioritized Ending Veteran Homelessness in the region. The County of San Diego will join community partners and other local municipalities in developing and implementing a regional strategic action plan to achieve functional zero for Veteran homelessness within a 15-month period and maximize available resources to meet our Veteran's housing needs across the region.

The introduction of the Veterans Affairs Supportive Housing (VASH) program in 2008 has been a key contribution to an over 55% reduction in Veterans experiencing homelessness nationwide since 2010 (from 76,329 Veterans in 2010 to 33,136 Veterans).¹ According to San Diego's regional 2022 Point-in-Time Count, while the number of persons experiencing

¹ San Diego Regional Task Force on Homelessness –Point in Time Count Results

homelessness saw an overall increase, Veteran homelessness in the region decreased by over 350 Veterans since the 2020 report, representing a 35% decrease over a two-year period.

The County of San Diego (County) has been engaged and working with the US Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and other partners to address the challenges in the region. Some recent highlights of County efforts include:

- **Enhancing outreach efforts** to identify and connect potential VASH eligible Veterans with the local San Diego Veterans Affairs Medical Center (VAMC);
- **Educating and engaging landlords and enhancing the County's Landlord Incentive Program (LIP)** to reduce the amount of time between voucher issuance and lease-up in competitive rental market;
- **Connecting Veterans with units** by providing vacancy leads through our Landlord Liaison to the VA for housing navigation; and
- **Streamlining administrative processes** to increase efficiencies and reduce barriers for Veterans.

While remarkable progress has been made, there is more to be done to help Veterans experiencing homelessness. According to the February 2023 US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) Dashboard, there are 2,334 VASH vouchers allocated to three of the housing authorities in the San Diego region. While the Housing Authority of the County of San Diego, the San Diego Housing Commission, and the Oceanside Housing Authority have over 1,670 Veteran families leased in units and receiving VASH assistance, over 650 VASH vouchers remain not utilized. In order to get our Veterans off of the streets and into housing, additional outreach and referrals from the local VA are needed throughout the region.

In 2022, the County received an average of less than 11 referrals per month. Recognizing the need to increase outreach capacity and referrals in the Housing Authority of the County of San Diego's jurisdiction, the San Diego VAMC has recently secured a contractor to administer a portion of the County's 300 unused VASH vouchers. So far in 2023, the County has received an average of 15 referrals per month. While we anticipate seeing the referral numbers to continue grow in 2023, the current pace is not nearly enough to fully utilize the vouchers within the next 12 months and still leaves too many Veterans far too long without a place to call home.

The VASH program has been one of the most instrumental resources available in helping Veterans overcome homelessness. Where the County has been successful in applying to HUD and bringing additional VASH vouchers to the region in the past, the inadequate referral rate has made the Housing Authority of the County of San Diego ineligible to apply for additional VASH vouchers (based on utilization rate thresholds). Not being able to apply for additional vouchers is a missed opportunity to help more Veterans move from the street and into permanent housing.

Identifying ways to enhance the San Diego VAMC's capacity to identify and refer

homeless Veterans to the housing authorities, such as expanding the local VA's current contract or entering an additional contract, is critical to fully utilizing the VASH resources available within San Diego County. Additional strategies that would help streamline access to VASH vouchers for eligible Veterans include:

- Expanding program-wide VASH waivers to align with flexibilities already allowed under the Emergency Housing Voucher and Stability Voucher programs, programs with populations like VASH recipients.
- Increasing the amount of VASH project-based vouchers, or PBVs, that the local VA will support per proposed housing development. Currently there is limit of 10 VASH PBVs per development or 10% of the requested PBV units; whichever is greater.
- Ensuring the San Diego VAMC and other partners provide adequate and equitable outreach/referrals throughout the region. The Housing Authority of the County of San Diego's jurisdiction includes 13 of the 18 incorporated cities and all unincorporated areas.
- Encouraging HUD to release guidance on qualifying housing authorities to become Designated Service Providers to help the VA with outreach and case management for a portion of the VASH vouchers.

Through a comprehensive, urgent, and collaborative approach, the County has committed to work in partnership with stakeholders including local municipalities, the Regional Task Force on Homelessness, the VA, and other community partners toward Ending Veteran Homelessness in San Diego.

Thank you for your time and attention and for inviting me to share our experiences in helping Veterans overcome homelessness. I welcome any questions that you may have.