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DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS (VA)
BEFORE THE
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

MAY 4, 2023

Good afternoon, Chairman Van Orden, Ranking Member Levin, and distinguished Members of the Subcommittee. I also want to acknowledge Ranking Member Takano who is also with us today. Thank you for the opportunity to testify on the topic of Veteran homelessness and the challenges and efforts in ending homelessness among Veterans in San Diego. I am accompanied today by Jill Albanese, Senior Advisor and Director of Clinical Operations, VA Homeless Programs Office.

Introduction

While VA provides programs and support services to combat Veteran homelessness nationwide, we are here to speak about the Healthcare for Homeless Veterans (HCHV) Program at the VA San Diego Healthcare System (VASDHS). Our programs have served Veterans to promote housing stability since 1987, and we work collaboratively with many community partners to ensure a full continuum of care and services.

The COVID-19 pandemic brought forth many added challenges for Veterans facing housing instability. However, the VA San Diego HCHV team relied on innovative solutions, initiatives, and collaborations to ensure that Veterans have access to housing and services to the greatest extent possible. This has been achieved through full participation in coordinated outreach and the use of the community's coordinated entry system, the provision of permanent and transitional housing programs and referrals, and the strengthening of our community-based partnerships.

During the 2022 Point in Time (PIT) Count, the San Diego region recorded a total of 8,427 sheltered and unsheltered individuals experiencing homelessness on a single night in February. Sheltered individuals were considered residing in an emergency shelter, transitional housing, or a safe haven. Unsheltered individuals were considered residing in a location not meant for habitation. Of the persons counted as homeless, 686 (8%) self-identified as Veterans. The homeless person's status as a Veteran and their character of discharge were not verified during the Count. Of those who self-identified as Veterans, 308 were sheltered and 378 were unsheltered. Based on these annual counts, the total number of Veterans experiencing homelessness in the region has decreased by 27% since 2020. During this same period, the count for the non-Veteran community increased by 10%. The PIT counts show a downward trend of the region's

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number of Veterans experiencing homelessness which has decreased by 58%. The COVID-19 pandemic caused a national suspension of the 2021 Point in Time Count.

Despite decreasing homelessness since 2011, there were challenges in meeting National VA Goals for permanent housing placements in San Diego. Nationally, the calendar year (CY) 2022 goal was to house 38,000 Veterans, with San Diego being assigned 842 of those 38,000 placements. During 2022, we housed 704 Veterans, reaching 84% of our goal. While we increased our housing placements from the year prior, we fell short of meeting the CY 2022 Permanent Housing Placement goal. San Diego original goal was impacted by special circumstances in FY 2021 during the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2020 and 2021, the City of San Diego utilized the Convention Center and centralized all services for homeless individuals in the area. This created efficiencies that enabled us to increase the rate of housing placements. These efficiencies were not able to be replicated when the Convention Center closed in 2021, which had an impact on providing services and housing Veterans in 2022. VA San Diego has also implemented many initiatives reflected in the testimony below to meet CY 2023 Permanent Housing Placement goals, aimed at increasing permanent housing, decreasing recidivism and engaging with Veterans facing homelessness.

COVID 19 Pandemic Impact on Homeless Services

Many of our strongest partnerships and initiatives were further developed during the early months of the global pandemic. During this period, VA and our community partners embraced the public health mandate that aligned with increased funding to engage and house as many Veterans as possible. While this time was challenging, there were positive and long-lasting impacts on the community that led to rapid housing that reflects the decrease in the Point in Time Count data above. Examples include:

- The City of San Diego utilization of the Convention Center to ensure that all individuals and families struggling with homelessness had access to shelter, basic necessities and services. This allowed VA San Diego to increase collaboration with community partners to streamline services and focus engagement efforts in one location. VA Programs had over 200 admissions into HUD-VASH and 135 Veterans were transferred directly from the Convention Center into housing over eleven months. This streamlined process was supported further by Department of Housing and Urban Development waivers, which San Diego Housing Commission applied for, and provided increased flexibilities of documentation that was needed to apply for housing vouchers. While the national waivers have ended, and the Convention Center closed, these enhanced partnerships between VA San Diego and our community partners endure.
- Funding flexibilities that permitted Grant and Per Diem (GPD) to increase the maximum per diem rate for grant recipients which resulted in additional services to Veterans, including COVID-19 isolation hotels, increased wages for staff

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retainment, additional support staff such as housing navigators, and creation of isolation rooms, in addition to other support services. Each GPD grant recipient in San Diego benefited from the increased per diem rates which addressed increased local operational costs. After May 11, 2023, the per diem rates will return to no more than 115% of the State Home domiciliary rate which is a maximum GPD grant per diem rate of \$64.82 per Veteran per night. We support the legislative proposal included in the FY 2024 budget that allows VA to increase per diem payments up to 200% of the State Home domiciliary rate. The increased per diem rates are essential to the survival of our transitional housing programs, and to ensure Veterans receive the support they require on their way to permanent housing.

- Programs including Ride Share, which enabled Veterans improved access to health care and housing services. Through Ride Share, over 4,400 rides were provided in fiscal year (FY) 2022, with almost 50% of those rides being used for medical care, and other rides being given for therapy appointments, vaccinations, employment, housing, legal follow up, and to access food.
- Supportive Services for Veteran Families (SSVF) provided hotel vouchers to be utilized by Veterans who required a non-congregate setting prior to obtaining permanent housing services.
- SSVF also released a special Notice of Funding Availability (NOFA) in FY 2022 to provide funding and increased opportunities to support Veterans, including housing navigation staff and support to locate housing and engage with landlords. In addition, the NOFA included special funding to assist in payments for Veteran security deposits, landlord incentives, and a discretionary fund for Veteran stabilization post housing.
- VA San Diego established new partnerships with community-based programs including Landlord Engagement and Assistance Program, Brilliant Corners, and San Diego County's Landlord Incentive Programs. These programs provide ancillary financial support, housing navigation, and a discretionary fund to Veterans seeking and stabilizing in permanent housing. These partnerships expedited permanent housing placements in a housing market that has a high cost of living and low vacancy rates.

VA Continuum of Care & Programs for Veterans with Housing Instability

The VA San Diego Healthcare for Homeless Veterans (HCHV) Program provides a continuum of services that includes outreach, medical care, transitional and permanent housing programs, legal support, employment services, and many partnerships with community providers. In FY 2022, the Healthcare for Homeless Veterans team served over 2,000 unique Veterans within the continuum of care. These programs work collaboratively with each other, as well as with our community partners,

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to assist Veterans in accessing housing and clinically indicated resources to move toward the goal of ending and preventing Veteran homelessness.

The VA San Diego HCHV Outreach team utilizes a combination of clinic and street-based interventions to engage Veterans and provide resources and referrals. They work closely with our community partners to screen and refer Veterans to appropriate housing and clinical services. This is achieved through partnering in the community and meeting with Veterans together, connecting through our Coordinated Entry System, bi-monthly case conferencing, and attending community-based meetings. Additionally, there is a walk-in clinic located at the VASDHS and staff respond to 40-50 hospital-based consults on a monthly basis and over 200 monthly national calls from the National Call Center for Homeless Veterans. In FY 2022, VASDHS received 2,708 calls and as of March 2023, VASDHS has received 1,413 calls from the National Call Center.

Special initiatives on this team include:

- North County partnership with Interfaith Community Services, Oceanside Homeless Outreach Team, People Assisting The Homeless in Downtown San Diego, within the Homelessness Response Center, coordinated outreach events planned by the City of San Diego, and multiple annual stand down events. Stand downs are events during which VA staff collaborates with our community partners and volunteers to provide food, clothing and health screenings to homeless and at-risk Veterans. In addition, Veterans also receive referrals for health care, housing, employment, substance use treatment, mental health counseling and other essential services.
- Participation in the Coordinated Outreach weekly meeting hosted by the City of San Diego and regular meetings with various homeless outreach providers.
- In the next year, the Social Work team will regionalize and assign an outreach specialist to different parts of the region, to include North County, East County, South Bay, and Central San Diego to include Downtown. This will increase specialization and ensure that the team can respond to the unique needs of each region within San Diego and build strong relationships with community-based outreach providers.

VA Transitional Housing Programs offer both Grant and Per Diem (GPD) beds and Contract Residential Specialty Beds with a variety of program models including bridge housing, service intensive beds, low demand, and clinical treatment. In FY 22, these programs served more than 450 unique Veterans amongst 5 different programs. VA liaisons work collaboratively with community partners with clinical and administrative collaboration meetings to decrease barriers to entry, enhance engagement, and connect Veterans to services. They ensure each Veteran has a viable permanent housing plan. New transitional housing programs that aim to enhance Veterans services include:

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- Under 38 USC 2061, a new Special Needs Grant for the Frail and Older Adult Veteran population that works with individuals who struggle in at least one activity of daily living.
- Existing community partners have recently applied for both transitional housing and case management grants to improve access to services for Veterans.
- Partnerships between transitional housing programs and Supportive Services for Veteran Families and HUD-VASH to ensure timely referrals and access to permanent housing placements.

The VA Homeless- Patient Aligned Care Team (H-PACT) team offers both walk-in and scheduled appointments to more than 300 enrolled Veterans, assisting Veterans in transitioning out of the hospital and those who require regular primary care services. Currently, a third of those enrolled in H-PACT are over 65 years of age and have Care Assessment Need (CAN) scores of over 90, which indicates that they have higher medical and mental health needs. The H-PACT team works closely with both VA medical services and the VA homeless team to ensure that the Veterans have increased access to care and housing supports.

Special initiatives include:

- A vaccination effort in response to community outbreaks of hepatitis A.
- Ongoing efforts to better integrate primary care medical services into the VA Emergency Department to ensure that any Veteran needing emergency care has primary care follow up, and to divert those from the emergency room to primary care, when medically indicated.
- A mobile medical unit is slated to be delivered in quarter (Q)4 of this year that will aim to increase medical outreach services in the community. The medical unit will allow H-PACT staff to go into the community to meet with Veterans where they reside for medical care and support. The medical unit will be shared with the outreach team for additional efforts to engage Veterans who require housing supports or other services.

The Veterans Justice Outreach (VJO) Program provides outreach, resources, referrals, and case management services to Veterans with a variety of justice-involved needs, ranging from those participating in Treatment Court to those who are incarcerated, those that may be on probation/parole, and for those in need of homeless court advocacy. Assisting Veterans in navigating their legal challenges, allows for a better transition from incarceration to housing, ensures that legal debts can be forgiven so Veterans can focus on their housing or clinical needs, and supports diversion so Veterans can access care over incarceration. Special initiatives include:

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- Case management services to Veterans involved in the following treatment court programs: San Diego Superior Court's Veterans Treatment Court, Federal Military Diversion Court, Homeless Court Program, and Federal Veterans Treatment Court.
- Homeless Court began in 1989, during the first Stand Down, and inspired many other communities to build similar courts to serve those struggling with legal infractions linked to housing instability. Homeless Court assists any individual that is working on their housing and clinical goals, to address legal infractions and fines. In FY 2022, Homeless Court dismissed \$27,345 in court fines and fees across 20 participants, with over \$375,000 of fines and fees dismissed since 2018. This program began in 2013, with close to 400 Veteran participants.
- A Veterans Module at the Sheriff's Department in the Vista Detention Center to offer information, resources, and participate in discharge planning for incarcerated Veterans to ensure that Veterans are linked to housing, substance use, medical, mental health, and employment programs prior to their release and case management services and post services to help reduce recidivism.
- A recent expansion of Veteran services within the San Diego Prison network offering resource information for incarcerated Veterans regarding filing for VA benefits and resources needed for reentry.

Employment Support: The HCHV team has employment readiness staff for those who are interested in workforce participation. Many Veterans face challenges to obtain or maintain employment when struggling with housing instability, and they benefit from full or part time employment once they are housed. Their interventions include assistance with job placement, coaching, referrals to appropriate community training programs, resume building, and other employment readiness, which can include civilian employment opportunities at Federal agencies. The US Department of Labor provides many Veteran employment services to include Veteran job listings on USAJobs.gov, information on starting a business through the Small Business Administration, a national resource directory, My Next Move for Veterans, employment opportunities by industry, and the Career One Stop website for career exploration, training, and jobs. Currently, the VA San Diego has two Employment Specialists providing services to 173 Veterans. Employment outcomes within the VA San Diego HUD-VASH program are currently at 41.46%, and GPD employment rates are at 50%. VA San Diego is working to on-board additional staffing resources to increase employment services and improve employment outcomes. Special employment initiatives focused on continuing to meet these goals include:

- Increased collaboration between employment support and transitional housing program participants to assist Veterans in accessing employment support as they prepare to transition to permanent housing.

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- Job readiness groups in the Vista Detention Facility on the Veterans module. These groups assist Veterans with linkage to employment in the transition from incarceration back to the community.

The HUD-VASH Program is a partnership with the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and the Veteran Affairs Supportive Housing (VASH) to align HUD housing vouchers for Veterans with supportive case management services from VA. Currently, HUD has 2,369 vouchers among 4 different Public Housing Authorities that are assigned to the VASH Program. Of those, 33 are reserved for future project-based programs, and 35 were awarded in FY 2023, and will actively be included in VA metrics starting in FY 2024. Hence, there are 2,301 vouchers actively counted. As of March 2023, there are 1,738 Veterans housed, which indicates a voucher usage of 75.5%. However, there are also 147 Veterans and their families with active vouchers searching for housing, and 39 Veterans and their families have identified housing and are awaiting PHA approval to sign the lease and move forward with the identified unit. That indicates an 84% usage of vouchers, with 16% (377 vouchers) available for use. In comparison to the last two fiscal years, the percentage of vouchers utilized has remained steady. However, San Diego has been awarded new vouchers each year which means increased housing placements for Veterans.

We continue to expand our efforts in the HUD-VASH program with the work of our VA Supportive Housing Case management team, which has a robust multi-disciplinary team that includes Social Workers, Nurse Practitioners, Occupational Therapists, Housing Specialists, and Registered Nurses.

They work closely together to creatively address challenges in voucher utilization and the needs of the Veterans they serve with many initiatives, to include:

- Expansion of both project vouchers and sponsor-based wrap around services to address challenges in availability and cost of housing.
- Expansion of service area into Imperial Valley and working collaboratively with established medical, mental health, and SSVF providers in the area to identify and work with Veterans requiring housing and case management services.
- Service provision to Veterans that were previously considered ineligible due to the character of their military discharge status or time in service, with the national expansion of eligibility, and working with community-based providers for needs outside of housing.
- HUD-VASH services contract that was awarded to People Assisting The Homeless (PATH). The contract enables PATH to provide case management services for homeless Veterans and assist them with obtaining and maintain housing through a HUD-VASH voucher.

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- VA San Diego has worked with our local Public Housing Authorities to identify special housing types to include board and cares, independent living facilities, and other shared living arrangements that are not traditionally used with a housing voucher. These housing types focus on older adult Veterans to support independent housing whenever clinically possible through collaboration with VA Geriatric Extended Care program in an initiative to identify available resources for our older adult Veterans and decrease barriers to accessing those resources.
- VA San Diego also supported San Diego Supportive Services for Veteran Families (SSVF) Grantees in applying for additional funds to support Veterans struggling in obtaining housing. These awarded funds allowed grantees to serve increased numbers of Veterans, as well as provided additional housing navigation supports, landlord incentives, and other financial incentives for eligible Veterans who have barriers to obtaining housing. This funding also expanded Veteran eligibility from 50% Area Median Income to 80% to allow more Veterans to be eligible for these services.
- VASH recognizes the need to assist Veterans who have graduated from services and prevent returning to homelessness. VASH's robust Aftercare Team provides services to Veterans who require short or longer-term assistance, ensuring that Veterans maintain housing. They engage in over 1,000 calls a year, more than 300 annual HUD recertifications, and support almost 800 Veterans who are considered to be in "graduation status" to ensure that services are available when needed. It is estimated that in FY 2022, 378 Veterans were able to maintain their housing vouchers due to this support.

VA Initiatives and Collaborations

VA San Diego Healthcare System has well established partnerships with many different faith-based and non-profit programs including: Interfaith Community Services (ICS), Veterans Village of San Diego (VVSD); Volunteers of America; Southwest (VOA); People Assisting the Homeless (PATH); Regional Task Force on the Homeless (RTFH); Family Health Centers of San Diego (FHCS); Alpha Project, San Diego Police Department Homeless Outreach Team (HOT); Oceanside Police Department Homeless Outreach Team (HOT); Vista Detention Center; San Diego Superior Court - Veterans Treatment Court; Federal Military Diversion Court; Federal Veterans Treatment Court; The Elks Club; AmVets; Brilliant Corners; The San Diego Housing Commission; The County of San Diego Public Housing Authority; the Imperial Valley Housing Authority; The City of Oceanside Public Housing Authority; HUD; and many other community partners. VASDHS is the co-founder of Stand Down alongside VVSD. These community partners have been strong allies in our efforts to address Veteran homelessness, and we appreciate their contributions to Veterans' health and welfare. VA cannot end Veteran homelessness alone, and depend heavily upon collaborative, joint efforts from community agencies and local governments.

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The VASDHS Chief, Social Work Service, is a Board Member of the San Diego Continuum of Care (CoC) Advisory Board. As part of the CoC, HCHV is a co-leader for the Veteran's Consortium Committee, which focuses on community action planning, data sharing, navigating community relationships, and creating sustainable systems in an effort to end Veteran homelessness. The Veteran's Consortium is dedicated to creating an accurate by-name-list of homeless Veterans and utilizing the case conferencing to identify programs and supports needed to move the individual to permanent housing.

Included in this effort is the utilization of our community's Coordinated Entry System to track inflow and outflow of Veterans experiencing homelessness. This data is utilized to better understand Veterans needs and provide timely housing services for any Veteran facing housing instability. The VASDHS' HCHV program participates in the local Coordinated Entry System (CES). The Coordinated Entry System is a centralized database system where Veterans are entered and matched to the most appropriate level of intervention, based on their acuity, vulnerability, and housing placement needs. Any participating agency in the region can enter homeless Veterans' information into the system which will connect them with available resources that are most appropriate to the level of intervention needed, including permanent supportive housing or rapid re-housing programs. In addition to the work with the CoC, HCHV is currently involved in the County Board of Supervisors' Initiative to end Veteran Homelessness and participating in the community workgroups created through the initiative. Past initiatives that VA San Diego participated in include the Mayor of San Diego's 1,000 Veterans program, the 25 Cities Initiative, Project 25, and many others.

Community Based Challenges Facing Veterans

Although our community has made significant efforts to address homelessness among Veterans in the San Diego area, several challenges remain. This includes a lack of affordable housing inventory and the high cost of living in the area. San Diego also would benefit from increased prevention funds to help Veterans and families maintain in their current housing whenever possible. We support the FY 2024 HUD budget proposal that seeks \$13 billion for housing vouchers for extremely low-income Veterans. These Veterans have what HUD calls "worst case housing needs," namely, incomes that do not exceed the federal poverty line or 30% of the area median income; pay more than half of their income for rental costs or live in housing with faulty heating or plumbing; and receive no housing assistance.

Conclusion

VA San Diego Healthcare System and HCHV are committed to ensuring Veterans have access to housing and services they require and deserve. We continue to improve access and services to meet the needs of Veterans. We appreciate the opportunity to appear before you today and the resources Congress provides VA to care for the Nation's Veterans. We are happy to respond to any questions you may have.