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

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Good afternoon, Chairman Van Orden, Ranking Member Levin, and other Members of the Subcommittee. My name is Thomas O'Toole and I serve as the Deputy Assistant Undersecretary for Health for Clinical Services with the Veterans Health Administration (VHA). Thank you for the invitation to testify before you.

No Veteran should face homelessness in the country they fought to defend. Ending Veteran homelessness is not only a moral imperative but also a practical investment in the well-being of those who have sacrificed for our Nation. By ensuring all Veterans have access to safe, affordable housing, and supportive services if needed, we can improve their quality of life and further honor their service. The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) is committed to ending homelessness among all Veterans because it is our Nation's duty to ensure they have a place to call home.

VA Homeless Programs

VA leads the federal response to end Veteran homelessness, offering a comprehensive array of services to meet the diverse housing needs of Veterans and their families. In fiscal year (FY) 2023, VA served over 210,000 Veterans in VA Homeless Programs.

VA's outreach efforts, such as the Health Care for Homeless Veterans (HCHV) program and the National Call Center for Homeless Veterans, play a crucial role in identifying and assisting Veterans experiencing homelessness in gaining access to essential health care, mental health support, and crisis intervention. For emergency and transitional housing, VA offers Health Care for Homeless Veterans (HCHV) Contracted Residential Services and the Grant and Per Diem (GPD) Program, providing short-term residential treatment and supportive housing.

Permanent housing and supportive services are critical components of VA's strategy. The Supportive Services for Veteran Families (SSVF) program provides financial assistance in the form of grants to eligible entities who provide and coordinate the provision of supportive services for very low-income families in an effort to prevent homelessness among Veterans and their families at risk for homelessness and rapidly re-house those who have become homeless. A collaboration with the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), the HUD-VA Supportive Housing (HUD-VASH)

Program provides permanent housing subsidies paired with VA case management and supportive services to help Veterans maintain stability and improve their quality of life.

Specialized programs like the Veterans Justice Program address the unique needs of Veterans involved with the criminal justice system. Employment and rehabilitation services, such as the Homeless Veterans Community Employment Services (HVCES), support Veterans in gaining employment and regaining their independence.

Goals, Progress, and Challenges

For the last three years, VA has set enterprise-wide goals to end Veteran homelessness. In calendar years (CY) 2022 and 2023, VA aimed to house 38,000 homeless Veterans each year. VA exceeded these goals, housing nearly 40,500 homeless Veterans in 2022 (6.3% above the target) and more than 46,500 in 2023 (22.5% above the target). Building on this success, VA has set three goals for FY 2024: (1) place at least 41,000 Veterans experiencing homelessness into permanent housing, (2) ensure that at least 95% of Veterans housed in FY 2024 do not return to homelessness during the year, and (3) engage with at least 40,000 unsheltered Veterans to help them obtain housing and other wraparound services.

As of May 31, 2024, VA has made significant progress towards these goals. More than 31,000 Veterans (75.8% of the goal) have been permanently housed, and VA is on track to meet this target while closely monitoring to ensure homeless Veterans receive the necessary housing resources. Notably, 97.4% of the Veterans housed to date have remained in housing, with just over 800 Veterans (2.6%) returning to homelessness. VA is closely monitoring this goal to ensure Veterans stay housed or are re-engaged if they become homeless again. Additionally, more than 28,000 unsheltered Veterans (70.1% of the goal) have been engaged, and VA is on track to meet this target while ensuring unsheltered Veterans are connected to housing resources.

VA homeless programs also utilize various performance indicators to evaluate operational effectiveness. These include permanent housing metrics to measure the placement rate of homeless Veterans into permanent housing, employment metrics to support housing stability, targeting metrics to identify engagement of homeless Veterans and ensure the right programs serve them, negative exit metrics to measure program and service effectiveness that will inform program operations to prevent homelessness, and hiring metrics to track the filling of specific purpose-funded positions.

While unhoused Veterans and Veterans at risk of homelessness face numerous challenges to housing stability, the primary obstacle is the lack of affordable housing. Although VA is working with federal partners to identify policy solutions to this barrier, America's homeless Veterans need landlords who are interested and willing to rent to them in the meantime. Landlords have a unique opportunity to give back to those who have served. Housing Veterans not only provides shelter but can lead to life-changing health, social, and socioeconomic outcomes for them and their families.

Tailoring Approaches for Veteran Subpopulations

VA is deeply committed to addressing the diverse and complex needs of unhoused Veterans through tailored approaches that reflect the expertise and perspective of Veterans with lived experiences. We actively engage these Veterans through channels such as the Advisory Committee on Homeless Veterans and the Veterans Engagement Panel for the Center for Homeless Veterans Research and Education.

To meet the specific needs of older Veterans, we have introduced the HUD-VASH Homeless Aging and Disabled Veteran initiative. This initiative aims to enhance access to Geriatric and Extended Care services, develop specialized housing options, expand the use of project-based vouchers with on-site services, and build stronger partnerships with community agencies. These efforts ensure comprehensive support for our aging Veterans, enabling them to live independently and with dignity.

Recognizing the unique needs of various subpopulations within the homeless Veteran community, including women Veterans, Veteran families, and those with acute social, mental, and physical needs, we have expanded our efforts. SSVF plays a critical role in preventing and addressing homelessness among these groups. In FY 2023, SSVF served over 100,000 Veterans and family members, including more than 10,000 women Veterans and over 11,000 households with children, providing essential services that promote housing stability and access to necessary resources.

We have also enhanced the adaptability and flexibility of our homeless programs. We offer short-term residential treatment and supportive housing tailored to Veterans' specific circumstances. This ensures they have access to health care, mental health services, and substance use treatment. Additionally, we are strengthening partnerships with community-based organizations to continue to enhance our transitional housing and services focusing on subpopulations such as women Veterans, Veterans with families, and those with mental health and substance use disorders. In FY 2023, the GPD program served over 18,000 Veterans, helping them achieve residential stability and improve their skills and income.

Furthermore, we have awarded GPD capital grants to convert transitional housing into individual units, provided Emergency Housing Assistance through SSVF, and offered training on outreach and access for unsheltered Veterans. VA remains dedicated to ensuring that every Veteran receives the support needed to rebuild their lives and achieve stability.

HUD-VASH Program

The HUD-VASH program pairs HUD's Housing Choice Voucher rental assistance with VA case management and supportive services to help homeless Veterans and their families obtain permanent housing and access necessary health care, mental health treatment, and other support services to improve their quality of life and maintain housing over time. As of May 31, 2024, more than 85,500 allocated vouchers were under a lease,

while the remaining vouchers were in various stages of utilization, including being in the hands of Veterans searching for housing and vouchers set aside for project-based development.

To increase voucher utilization, HUD and VA hosted ten in-person boot camps last year, providing staff from VA, HUD, and local public housing agencies (PHA) with opportunities to improve processes, share best practices, and create action plans to move Veterans from homelessness to permanent housing more efficiently. HUD and VA are now collaborating to evaluate regional action plans, collate boot camp themes, and provide targeted technical assistance.

Recognizing the need to expand integration efforts, VA is implementing enhanced and innovative service models, including providing guidance on co-enrollment with other VA and community partner programs and developing collaborative case management models with VA-funded grantees and community partners as VA-designated service providers to augment services to Veterans.

Data Collection and Information Sharing

VA effectively utilizes a variety of data sources to monitor, evaluate, and improve its homelessness programs, ensuring that Veterans receive the highest quality care and support. Central to this effort are the Homeless Management Information System (HMIS) and the Homeless Operations Management and Evaluation System (HOMES), both of which play critical roles in data collection and analysis.

HMIS is a community-based technology system used to collect client-level data for individuals receiving services related to homelessness or being at risk of homelessness. Administered through local Continuums of Care (CoC) designated by HUD, each CoC has an HMIS Lead responsible for managing the system according to HUD's data standards. HUD has established performance measurements that utilize HMIS data to analyze the effectiveness of the homeless response system. These standards are updated every two to three years in collaboration with VA and other federal partners, ensuring the data remains relevant and accurate.

HOMES is VA's primary platform for collecting information on homeless Veterans, with the exception of the SSVF program, which utilizes HMIS. VA ensures that data from HMIS and HOMES are consolidated, processed, and de-duplicated for reporting purposes. The data collected through HMIS and HOMES includes comprehensive service delivery information over a full year, compared to the single-day estimates provided by the Point-in-Time (PIT) Count conducted by local CoCs. This approach allows VA to capture a more detailed and continuous picture of the services provided and the outcomes achieved.

SSVF grantees upload relevant data from HMIS to a VA HMIS Repository each month. Similarly, GPD Case Management grantees submit data to HMIS for upload to the Repository. These uploads enable VA to maintain a comprehensive database that supports informed decision-making and program evaluation.

Additionally, the Homeless Programs Gap Analysis tool is a key component of our resource allocation and request process. It is updated annually and incorporates data from VA, HUD, and community sources. This includes HUD's Point-in-Time (PIT) and Housing Inventory Count (HIC) data, VA resource and housing placement data, and community By-Name List (BNL) data when available. VAMCs are encouraged to share the Gap Analysis with the local CoC and community partners. By analyzing this data, VA can estimate future needs, identify potential gaps, and determine areas of excess. This information is utilized at both the national and local levels for resource allocation and planning. A use case example at the VAMC level, involves discussion of the Gap Analysis with VA and community partners, identifying opportunities to improve operational strategies, and working together to close gaps. This helps promote collaboration between programs/partners resulting in improved housing placements.

Improvements

VA and HUD have been collaboratively working on information sharing between the HOMES and HMIS systems since approximately 2017. This collaboration has involved convening workgroups with federal and community partners, as well as privacy and information security officers. Together, they achieved the authority for VA to disclose relevant health care and demographic information to agencies, housing resources, and community providers for purposes such as coordinating care, expediting housing access, providing services, participating in coordinated entry processes, reducing Veteran homelessness, identifying individuals in need of immediate assistance, and ensuring program accountability.

VA is actively collaborating with HUD and other external stakeholders to implement section 309 of the Joseph Maxwell Cleland and Robert Joseph Dole Memorial Veterans Benefits and Health Care Improvement Act of 2022 (Division U of P.L. 117-328). Under section 309, VA and HUD are required to work together to develop a system for effectively sharing and reporting data between the community-wide homeless management information system described in section 402(f)(3) of the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act (42 U.S.C. 11360a(f)(3)) and HOMES. VA will need to expand its HMIS Repository to allow data imports from CoCs for all Veterans in their catchment area by December 2025.

VA is currently focused on testing expanded uploads to the HMIS Repository by the end of calendar year 2024. This phase allows for thorough troubleshooting and the development of technical assistance, paving the way for a full national rollout by the end of 2025. While this progress is promising, several ongoing areas of engagement may influence the timeline, including addressing privacy and information security concerns, managing potential increased costs from CoCs associated with expanded uploads and reporting, and ensuring adequate resources to handle the influx of data and develop meaningful reports. VA remains committed to collaborating with stakeholders to navigate these challenges towards the implementation of the expanded HMIS Repository uploads.

Conclusion

Significant progress has been made toward ending Veteran homelessness, with Veteran homelessness cut by more than half since 2010. However, much work remains to be done. VA will not rest until every Veteran has a safe, stable, accessible, and affordable home. We are deeply grateful for the ongoing support and investments from Congress in addressing the challenges of Veteran homelessness, especially in the face of soaring housing shortages and costs, high unemployment rates following the Great Recession, and disruptions from the COVID-19 pandemic. Your continued assistance has been crucial to sustain and accelerate the progress we have made in reducing Veteran homelessness.

Chairman Van Orden, Ranking Member Levin, this concludes my testimony. Thank you once again for the invitation to join you today. I am prepared for your questions.