

**Testimony of Nicholas Wood, Regional Director for Nation's Finest
House Committee on Veterans Affairs
June 27, 2024**

Chairman Van Orden, Ranking Member Levin, Members of the Committee: thank you for the opportunity to offer testimony on behalf of Nation's Finest today.

For 50 years, Nation's Finest's purpose has been to serve, house, and rehabilitate veterans experiencing homelessness. My name is Nicholas Wood, and I serve as the Regional Director for our outreach and facilities in Arizona and Nevada. I am proud to have served the veterans in our communities for the last 10 years.

Nation's Finest specializes in serving veterans in rural and remote areas. We did this for two reasons:

1. **First**, There is a higher per capita rate of homelessness among veterans in rural areas; and
2. **Second**, There are fewer resources available to those veterans.

One of the greatest challenges we face are inaccuracies with PIT counts, which determines the funding for the work we do.

For example, in 2023, the Reno 2023 PIT count said there were 152 homeless veterans in the area. But we have *already* served 282 veterans this year. Clearly the PIT count dramatically undercounted homeless veterans in the Washoe County CoC.

Reno is not an anomaly. We frequently see that official data does not reflect the actual number of veterans we serve.

So...starting in 2022, Nation's Finest began development of our own tool called "Veteran View" to help us get a more comprehensive count of potentially homeless veterans. Using this information, here's what we see in the Reno area:

- PIT counts have ranged between 119 and 152 homeless veterans over the last 5 years.
- But Census data tells us that there are 1,598 below-poverty/disabled veterans, which are the veterans most likely to experience housing instability.
- Because the ratio between these two data points is high, we know that the PIT probably underestimates the number of veterans we will actually serve.

Chairman Van Orden, let's look at your district. The lack of major metropolitan areas means providers must use the PIT 'balance of state' data, which is every town and county that is

not in a major metropolitan area in the State of Wisconsin. This is overly broad, and another weakness of the PIT. For your district:

- The PIT says there are 176 homeless veterans outside the major metropolitan areas.
- Census data tells us that in Eau Claire and LaCrosse, there are 363 below-poverty/disabled veterans.

Ranking Member Levin, for your district, we look at both the San Diego and Orange County numbers. Given the population and size of these counties, it is difficult to say how exactly this impacts your district, however we know that:

- PIT says there are 1,052 homeless veterans in Orange and San Diego Counties.
- But the Census identified 6,622 below-poverty/disabled veterans.
- This ratio tells us the actual number of homeless veterans is probably higher than what is projected by the PIT count.

I would also be happy to build additional profiles for other districts, if there is interest.

Clearly, PIT counts are insufficient for capturing a complete picture of the need, and basing resource allocation on PIT counts alone is highly detrimental to rural and urban service providers alike.

But even with better data, and therefore more equitable distributions, we still will not be able to meet the need with the currently available resources.

The current rate for the Grant Per Diem (GPD) program is grossly insufficient. For instance, we do not operate GPD in Carson City because it is not sustainable. To address this, Congress should enact the Elizabeth Dole Home Care Act and implement and fully fund a new formula for GPD over the long term.

Congress and the VA should also allow for SSVF providers to receive administrative costs at the same rate as other VA programs.

And finally, Congress must recognize that reaching veterans in rural communities requires unique resources. In our case, we developed our telehealth equipped Mobile Service Units so that we can meet veterans where they are instead of waiting on them to come to us. Congress and the VA should provide rural partners additional funding to ensure we can reach every veteran, regardless of where they are.

As I conclude this testimony, I want to recognize the fantastic work that this Committee and the VA has done to improve the lives of all veterans. We've made great strides in recent years, but until we connect every veteran to the services they have earned, we are not done. Thank you again for the opportunity to be here today, and I look forward to answering your questions.