



My name is Carole Benedict, National Director of Executive Leadership for U.S. VETS, formerly serving as the Executive Director at the U.S.VETS Prescott, Arizona location. U.S.VETS, the leading nonprofit organization committed to the welfare of at-risk veterans and their families experiencing homelessness, is the largest provider in this sector. Our mission is to ensure a smooth transition for military veterans and their families back into civilian life, offering an array of supportive services including housing, counseling, career development, and comprehensive support. Since inception in 1993, U.S.VETS has engaged with over 179,000 veterans, provided homes for more than 57,000, and placed nearly 15,000 veterans into employment.

I am privileged to present this statement on behalf of U.S.VETS in Prescott, Arizona, and the veterans in rural communities they serve at the oversight hearing of the Committee on Veterans' Affairs on January 11, 2024.

Since opening in 2003, U.S.VETS - Prescott has been a critical resource in Arizona, providing housing and comprehensive services to over 8,500 veterans in the past 21 years. In Arizona, particularly within Yavapai County where Prescott is located, challenges are pronounced due to the rural setting. The county, with a population density of only twenty-six people per square mile and 11% of whom are veterans, faces unique challenges. The cost of housing here is significantly high, 42% above the national average. Furthermore, the Northern Arizona VA Healthcare System, covering a vast area of 65,000 square miles, includes regions with some of the highest rates of veteran suicides in Arizona from 2015 to 2022. During the 2021 point-in-time count, over 15% of individuals in Arizona's homeless shelters were identified as veterans.

At U.S.VETS - Prescott, the team confronts these challenges daily. Despite the Veterans Affairs' (VA) advancements in providing care and benefits, significant obstacles remain. These include difficulties in travel, inadequate funding for homeless veterans, and a lack of affordable housing. The VA's Community Based Outreach Clinics (CBOCs), although beneficial, do not fully address the vast distances and transportation challenges inherent to rural environments, nor do they comprehensively address the complex health issues faced by many veterans. The existing grant and per diem rates for homeless veterans are insufficient, failing to reflect the actual costs of service provision in these areas.

One of the major barriers for rural veterans in Prescott is transportation, as there is no public transportation system. U.S.VETS - Prescott offers three scheduled van trips daily to the VA and healthcare providers over one hundred miles away in Phoenix and other outlying areas. This service is crucial for veterans who would otherwise be unable to access necessary care due to distance and transportation challenges.

U.S.VETS - Prescott's on-site services are comprehensive. They provide three meals daily along with snacks, case management, employment assistance, transportation, career development, individual and group counseling, and housing navigation. The organization offers six different housing interventions, including emergency shelter, transitional housing, long-term supportive



housing, housing for frail elderly, transition in place, rapid rehousing, and specialized housing for veterans who are victims of military sexual assault.

In addition to these services, U.S.VETS - Prescott contracts with local community providers to offer unique therapies often inaccessible to veterans, such as equine therapy, acupuncture, biofeedback, and CNA care for elderly veterans. These therapies are vital for veterans who lack financial and transportation resources to access specialized care.

In September 2023, U.S.VETS - Prescott opened the Veteran Connection Hub in Prescott, focusing on suicide prevention among veterans. The Hub offers a range of support services, including counseling, support groups, access to mental health professionals, and benefits counseling. Their approach is proactive and preventative, focusing on early intervention and resilience-building strategies.

Moreover, U.S.VETS - Prescott annually hosts a 2-day Stand Down event, bringing together over thirty-five providers from various sectors, including the local health department, motor vehicle services, VA, Department of Economic Security, and other community service organizations. 185 veterans were assisted at this event in 2023. This event serves as a one-stop resource for veterans, offering a range of services in one location. Notably, the Stand Down event also includes a full-day veteran court, which has proven highly effective, with over forty veterans having their cases resolved in a single day.

U.S.VETS - Prescott's collaboration with the Northern Arizona VA Healthcare System is multifaceted and enhances their service delivery. This partnership provides the flexibility to tailor programs to fill gaps in services that the VA may not cover, including specialized programs and support services designed to address the specific challenges faced by the veteran community. Additionally, their collaboration with the VA ensures a smooth transition for veterans requiring services through the VA, reducing bureaucratic hurdles and delays, and providing veterans with timely and efficient access to a wide range of resources and support.

U.S.VETS - Prescott is more than just a service provider; it is a community dedicated to supporting veterans in every aspect of their lives. However, the sustainability of their work is challenged by the low per diem rates, which are incongruent with the escalating costs due to inflation and the growing complexity of the needs of the veterans they assist. U.S.VETS has been a strong advocate of H.R. 3848, the HOME Act, and requests your strong advocacy with the Senate to pass this bill which will bring per diem rates in line with actual expenditures, particularly in rural areas, that will help them better serve veterans in rural areas.

U.S.VETS - Prescott believes in a collaborative approach with federal, state, and local entities, along with veteran service organizations, to develop effective solutions. Their goal is to ensure that every veteran has equitable access to the care and benefits they deserve. U.S.VETS - Prescott looks forward to working with the Committee on Veterans' Affairs and other stakeholders to enhance support and access for rural veterans.



House Committee on Veterans Affairs  
Oversight Hearing  
“Rural Access: Is VA Meeting All Veterans Where They Live?”  
January 10, 2024  
Testimony by Carole Benedict/U.S.VETS

References:

[https://dvs.az.gov/sites/default/files/2022-07/2022-07-14-AVSAC%20Strategic%20Policy%20Objectives%20-%20APPROVED\\_1.pdf](https://dvs.az.gov/sites/default/files/2022-07/2022-07-14-AVSAC%20Strategic%20Policy%20Objectives%20-%20APPROVED_1.pdf)

[https://cvpcs.asu.edu/sites/default/files/2023-11/vetsuicide2023\\_july\\_v2\\_003.pdf](https://cvpcs.asu.edu/sites/default/files/2023-11/vetsuicide2023_july_v2_003.pdf)

<https://population.us/county/az/yavapai-county/>

[https://www.bestplaces.net/cost\\_of\\_living/county/arizona/yavapai](https://www.bestplaces.net/cost_of_living/county/arizona/yavapai)