

Testimony of Congressman Ted W. Lieu (CA-33)
House Committee on Veterans' Affairs
Subcommittee on Health
334 Cannon House Office Building
December 8, 2015

Chairman Benishek, Ranking Member Brownley, and members of the Committee on Veterans' Affairs, I want to thank you for inviting me to testify at today's legislative hearing.

I am pleased to join you to discuss H.R. 3484, the Los Angeles Homeless Veterans Leasing Act of 2015 that I authored. This legislation authorizes the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to enter into Enhanced Use Leases at the West Los Angeles Campus.

As a Veteran myself, it is a privilege to represent the West Los Angeles VA Medical Center (West LA VA), the largest VA Medical Center in the nation. Our VA hospital does a tremendous amount of good every day for our Veterans. However, Los Angeles County is also ground zero for homeless Veterans, with thousands sleeping on the streets each night. The numbers are daunting and the urgency to provide permanent homes to these Veterans must be a priority.

The West LA VA has a complicated history. It has not always served our Veterans to the standard that they deserve and the American people expect. For many years the campus was mismanaged and inappropriate uses were permitted to operate on the property.

I am pleased to report, however, that a significant shift has occurred this year among all stakeholders, including the VA, Veteran Service Organizations, elected officials, the community, and our Veterans. We have come together on the heels of a landmark legal settlement of a lingering lawsuit brought by the ACLU on behalf of homeless Veterans. The terms of the settlement call for the development of a Master Plan for the West LA VA to guide its future service to our Veterans. In addition, a comprehensive Homeless Plan has been developed for the region and implementation has already begun.

A critical part of the Master Plan and Homeless Plan includes the construction of Permanent Supportive Housing. As the Subcommittee knows, "Housing First" is the evidence-based model for providing stable permanent housing to Veterans followed by intense services. Unfortunately, the West LA VA does not currently offer any of these desperately-needed Permanent Supportive Housing units.

The best vehicle for the development of Permanent Supportive Housing is a public-private partnership using an Enhanced Use Lease. These leases allows for leasing terms of up to 75

years, enabling affordable housing developers to gain financing and accrue tax credits while constructing housing for our Veterans.

Every other VA facility across the nation has the authority to enter into Enhanced Use Leases except for West LA. The prohibition on Enhanced Use Leases dates back to 2008 when the West LA VA was not being managed responsibly. United States Senator Dianne Feinstein and Congressman Henry Waxman drafted language that was signed into law which prohibits Enhanced Use Leases. Their concern at the time was that the property would be commercialized through the use of these leases. But today the climate is different and the Master Plan and Homeless Plan will not succeed without this important leasing tool.

The public comment period for the Draft Master Plan closed yesterday. Secretary McDonald will now review the comments and update the Draft. The current Plan calls for 150 units of Permanent Supportive Housing followed by 700 to 900 units depending upon need.

My bill, H.R. 3484, restores the authority to the VA to enter into Enhanced Use Leases solely for the purpose of developing supportive housing for homeless and at-risk Veterans. I am pleased to report Senator Feinstein has introduced S. 2013 in the Senate, the companion bill to H.R. 3484. It is my hope the bills will pass through committee and go to the floors of our respective chambers very soon. Without Enhanced Use Leases, our ability to serve vulnerable veterans on this property will be stalled.

An additional point I would like to share with the Committee involves a subway that is being built in Los Angeles County known as the Purple Line. Its alignment will pass directly next to the West LA VA. Over the last few years, the VA and our local transit authority, Metro, have been in discussions about locating a stop on the West LA VA. Veterans, their families, VA staff and the public would significantly benefit by gaining access to public transit on the VA grounds. This legislation is not intended in any way to impede a Metro stop on the West LA VA campus. If necessary, I am open to amending the bill to clarify that a subway stop is consistent with the Draft Master Plan and permissible under the bill.

Finally, I am delighted to let the Subcommittee know that this legislation has gained support on the ground from cities to homeowners' groups to Veterans Service Organizations. I believe their formal support is recognition that our homeless Veterans deserve Permanent Supportive Housing and the West LA VA is a proper and appropriate campus on which to build it.

I would like to enter letters and resolutions in support of H.R. 3484 into the record from the following institutions:

- Brentwood Glen Association
- City of Agoura Hills
- City of Los Angeles
- County of Los Angeles
- Holmby Westwood Property Owners Association
- Jewish War Veterans Post 118
- Los Angeles Neighborhood Council Coalition

- Pacific Palisades Democratic Club
- Pacific Palisades Task Force on Homelessness
- South Brentwood Residents Association
- University Synagogue
- Westwood Homeowners Association
- Westwood Neighborhood Council

I would like to thank the Subcommittee again for allowing me to advocate for this pending legislation.