

House Committee on Veterans Affairs  
Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity  
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Testimony by Stephen Peck, MSW, President/CEO U.S.VETS

Good afternoon. My name is Stephen Peck and I'm the President and CEO of U.S.VETS. I'm also a Vietnam veteran. I served with the First Marine Division near Danang in '69-'70, and I've been doing this work since 1991. U.S.VETS has been in the fight against veterans' homelessness since 1993 when we started our first program in Inglewood, California. Since then we have grown into the largest veteran-specific non-profit housing and service provider in the country, providing services at 21 residential sites and 9 service centers in 14 cities across 6 states, and the District of Columbia.

Last year, U.S.VETS, touched the lives of over 17,000 veterans and family members; provided housing to more than 4,500; provided preventive and rapid rehousing services to 4,600 veterans and family members in the community, and placed more than 1,200 veterans into living wage employment.

Locally, U.S.VETS - Inland Empire, our project headquartered at March Air Reserve Base, is the largest veteran housing provider in San Bernardino and Riverside Counties. This year in these two counties, about 2,000 veterans will experience homelessness. But 26,000 veteran households are living in poverty, on the brink of homelessness. The Inland Empire unemployment rate among veterans 9.5%, about double the national average.

Despite the fact that many of our veterans have legal issues such as DUI, Domestic Violence, and Child Support as a direct result of dealing with Traumatic Brain Injury, Post-Traumatic Stress, and/or Combat Trauma, we were able to help about 90 veterans return to full time employment.

With over two hundred units of housing, from permanent supportive to Bridge Housing and Safe Haven, we've been able to help more than 800 veterans and their family members find housing in 2014-15, and we are on track this year to help more than a thousand.

Our services are comprehensive. To us there is no one answer to homelessness, so we co-locate housing, counseling and employment assistance at each of our sites, helping to create an environment that is responsive to the many challenges veterans face as they transition from military to civilian life. Our services include

rapid re-housing beds, transitional and permanent supportive housing, and support services to homeless and at-risk veterans in the community, helping each veteran, male or female achieve self-sufficiency.

We want to prevent veterans from becoming homeless if we can, so along with the VA Supportive Services for Veterans Families program, we provide preventative mental health counseling to veterans in the community through our Outside the Wire program; and employment assistance to veterans who are not yet homeless, and are ready to return to work through our Career Development Initiative (CDI). Last year through this program we helped 450 veterans return to work at an average wage of \$45,000 a year. Both of these programs are completely privately funded.

Back in 1993, we started with the idea that every veteran should be empowered to live at their highest level of independence, which means that we want every veteran who is capable of full time employment to have the dignity of finding a job. Every site has a career center and our workforce teams are critical to the success of our veterans.

We have six HVRP programs across the country, including one in Los Angeles County, which helped us place 618 vets into full time employment this past year at an average wage of \$12.00 an hour. We've developed other state and private workforce funding to make up for the limitations of the HVRP program.

Let me make a few observations if I may:

First: One of the limitations of operating HVRP is its inability to assist those veterans that may be at-risk of homelessness, such as the veterans we are serving through our SSVF program. They are not yet homeless and therefore do not qualify for HVRP services. We do not always have other workforce funding to help these veterans but if we could help them prior to the on-set of homelessness we may be able to prevent them from losing their housing.

This is where our Career Development Initiative comes into play. Fully one-third of our job placements last year were made through the CDI program because of lack of sufficient and flexible funding from DOL.

Nationally, the HVRP funding has been flat lined for the past three years, while increasing numbers of vets return from deployment, all them needing jobs. The program is authorized at \$50M, but it has never reached this funding level and is stuck at \$38M, leaving thousands of veterans without the employment assistance they need. Currently, there is no HVRP funding in Riverside County.

Secondly: The ultimate goal of the HVRP program is to place veterans into long lasting employment. If there were additional funds available to expand follow-up services to include more than just counseling and placement, services such as additional training if necessary, grantees could be more supportive to those veterans, help them secure higher paying jobs, and ensure that they keep their jobs.

And finally: The VA and HUD emphasis on quickly moving vets out of service intensive transitional housing, into permanent housing does have some unintended consequences. Once they are in permanent housing, they are ineligible for HVRP. Making them eligible for 90 days after they move would alleviate this problem. But the ready availability of HUD-VASH vouchers, marketed heavily by the VA and others in the community, can create a disincentive for some veterans to seek employment. Crawling out of homelessness and building the skills to become self-sufficient is difficult. We and other providers, have had many veterans who have been in our workforce programs, readying themselves for employment, who suddenly drop out of the job search because they heard of the possibility of receiving a VASH voucher. What they say to us is “I don’t want to endanger my possibility of getting my voucher by getting a job. The income may disqualify me.” That is a terrible disservice to that veteran – trading a productive career for a lifetime of dependence.

We have more resources than ever before to help veterans who are homeless, and it is up to all of us to use them wisely, empowering the veterans we are pledged to serve, and making sure we are providing them the skills that will help them, as one of our vets said, "to bring back the man who once wore the military uniform with pride and honor."