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**STATEMENT OF  
CITY OF RIVERSIDE  
COMMUNITY & ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT DEPARTMENT  
EMILIO RAMIREZ  
DEPUTY DIRECTOR  
BEFORE THE  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY  
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS  
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

**FINDING SOLUTIONS FOR VETERAN HOMELESSNESS IN SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA**

**January 20, 2016**

**Introduction**

Chairman Wenstrup, Ranking Member Takano and members of the Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity, I am grateful to be invited to testify before you today on behalf of the City of Riverside regarding our collaborative efforts to combat chronic homelessness and our work to end homelessness amongst our honored veterans. We appreciate your attention to continuing this good fight and for your effort in "Finding Solutions for Veteran Homelessness in Southern California."

This hearing is both significant and timely for the region because accepting and succeeding in the Mayor's Challenge to End Veteran Homelessness required real collaboration among many different partners, including federal, state and local jurisdictions, as well as many private partners. If we are going to have a chance at a permanent solution for veteran and chronic homelessness, we need that collaboration to strengthen, grow and continue. The City of Riverside is encouraged by the success in the Mayor's Challenge to End Veteran's Homelessness, and by the prospect of developing a regional plan in partnership with our neighboring jurisdictions to address homelessness across the region. We have not yet formally engaged our federal partners but I see no better time to invite you to this effort than now.

The City of Riverside Homeless Services Program was established to connect homeless individuals with social services and housing. The City has taken a pro-active approach to addressing homelessness in our community by cultivating partnerships with the County of Riverside, a wide-range of non-profit organizations, social service agencies and faith-based institutions.



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## Partnerships

Riverside has created a centralized environment to provide short-term emergency shelter, coupled with a range of complimentary supportive services that are necessary to assist homeless individuals and families achieve housing stability.

The City has found success with the Housing-First model and evidence-based case management to help individuals exit life on the streets and transition to self-sufficiency. The Housing First Model emphasizes moving homeless individuals into housing as quickly as possible and provide the appropriate level of services to support housing stabilization and retention.

The Riverside Homeless Services Campus on Hulen Place includes the Path of Life Riverside Community Shelter, “The Place” Safe Haven Supportive Housing and Drop-In Center and the City operated Multi-Service Access Center. Together, this partnership provides short-term emergency shelter, meals, case management, a pet kennel, medical services and permanent supportive housing for those with mental health concerns. Collaboration is the key to our success. Our on the ground partners include:

1. Health to Hope Medical Clinic
2. Social Security Administration
3. California Department of Motor Vehicles
4. Path of Life Ministries Community Shelter
5. Path of Life Ministries Family Shelter
6. Set Free Ministries
7. U.S. Department of Veterans' Affairs
8. Riverside County Housing Authority
9. Riverside County Department of Mental Health
10. Riverside County Department of Public Social Services
11. U.S. Vets
12. Lighthouse Social Services
13. Foothill Aids Project
14. Roy's Desert Resource Center
15. MFI Recovery Center
16. Cedar House
17. Riverside Treatment Center
18. Riverside Police Department
19. Riverside Probation Department
20. Riverside Sheriff's Office
21. Riverside Parole Office



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22. Coachella Valley Rescue Mission
  23. Operation Safe House
  24. Riverside Unified School District
  25. Alvord Unified School District
  26. Riverside County Animal Services
  27. Arlington Temporary Assistance
  28. Salvation Army
  29. Catholic Charities
  30. Community Connect
  31. Community Settlement Association
  32. Family Service Association
  33. YMCA Riverside
  34. Goodwill Resource Center
  35. Department of Rehabilitation
  36. Riverside Transit Agency
  37. Riverside Community College
  38. California Baptist University
  39. University of California, Riverside
  40. California State University San Bernardino
  41. Intercoast College
  42. Harvest Christian Fellowship
  43. Kansas Seventh Day Church
  44. Our Lady of Perpetual Help
  45. Calvary Presbyterian Church
  46. First Congregational Church

In addition to overseeing operation of the entire campus, the City operates a Multi-Service Access Center. The City's Access Center provides an entry point and service hub to the City's Continuum of Care. The Access Center provides a wide-range of services under a single-roof: homeless prevention resources, homeless street outreach, basic needs emergency assistance, transportation assistance, housing navigator services, employment development, benefits enrollment, health care, mental health services, substance abuse recovery, veteran's services, life skills training, financial counseling, legal services, access to a telephone and computers, and a permanent mailing address.



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## Programs

The City's homeless services staff operate a menu of programs designed to provide holistic supportive services.

### Homeless Outreach Program

The Homeless Outreach Team is comprised of four service providers who conduct daily mobile outreach and client service engagement for homeless individuals and families on the street, in service venues, and around town. The Outreach Team responds to people in need of assistance, as well as local residents and businesses in the community. The Outreach Team focuses on those "hardest to reach" and "service resistant" homeless individuals. The Outreach Team partners with other city staff, local services providers, health professionals, law enforcement and the community at-large to help people get off of the streets and connect to services they need to gain stable housing and achieve self-sufficiency. Local service providers and community volunteers participate in "ride-alongs" to help engage people in need.

### Navigating Back Home

Once the Homeless Outreach Team is able to identify and build a rapport with homeless individuals living on the streets, vehicles and places not meant for human habitation; the team transports the homeless individual to the Riverside Access Center to begin the housing process. At the Riverside Access Center, there are two full-time housing navigators assigned to assist individuals and families break the cycle of homelessness by moving them from the street to interim housing, accessing necessary social services, and rapidly obtaining permanent housing. The housing navigators provide individualized client support throughout this entire journey by assisting each client develop a plan to address their barriers, increase their income, and maintain and sustain permanent housing. As part of the client's case management plan, the housing navigator will identify each area in which clients will need assistance to accomplish the outlined goals and objectives such as scheduling appointments, applying for mainstream benefits and identifying subsidized housing. The housing navigator's level of case management is intensive and requires extensive time and commitment to each individual client. The housing navigator's overall goal is to assume full responsibility for their clients' success in securing and maintaining permanent housing utilizing a housing first approach.



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## Tenant-Based Rental Assistance

This program provides eligible homeless individuals and families as well as those at-risk of becoming homeless in the City with short-term rental subsidies coupled with home-based case management. This effort currently includes HUD funded Permanent Supportive Housing Program; the Veteran's Administration Supportive Housing initiative administered by U.S. Department of Veterans' Affairs and the Housing Authority of the County of Riverside, the City's HOME-funded Tenant Based Rental Assistance program and the Shelter Plus Care "Street to Home" Project.

## Permanent Supportive Housing Program

The City operates a Permanent Supportive Housing Program, funded with an annual allocation through the HUD Continuum of Care Supportive Housing Program to support development and operation of two permanent supportive housing communities for sixteen households. One of the communities provides supportive housing specifically to chronically homeless individuals and the second community provides supportive housing to homeless with disabling conditions. On-going case management and supportive services are provided to participants to help ensure housing stability.

## Veterans' Affairs Supportive Housing Initiative

The Obama Administration has set a goal of ending homelessness among veterans over the next five-years. The Department of Veterans' Affairs is working in collaboration with the Housing and Urban Development Department to provide targeted housing choice vouchers to homeless veterans throughout the country. Locally, the VA Loma Linda is working in collaboration with Housing Authority of the County of Riverside, the Homeless Outreach Team and other continuum of care partners to assist homeless veterans with moving off the streets and into permanent supportive housing. The Veterans' Affairs Supportive Housing Initiative provides a veteran the ability to choose where they live and ensure that their housing choice is affordable.

## Housing First Initiative

The City is working with community partners to implement the best practice "Housing First" approach which emphasizes moving people into housing as quickly as possible and provide the appropriate level of services to support housing stabilization and retention, into all aspects of our local continuum of care. The Housing First approach represents a significant shift away from the traditional homeless service delivery system to one focused on homeless prevention, rapid re-housing and home-based case management to facilitate client stabilization leading to self-sufficiency.



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## **Mayor's Challenge to End Veteran's Homelessness**

The Mayor's Challenge is a nationwide effort to end veteran homelessness in the United States. In June 2015, Mayor Rusty Bailey eagerly accepted the challenge. Our identified goal was to permanently house 86 homeless veterans in City by December 31, 2015. Through dedicated and diligent outreach efforts, 86 homeless veterans were identified in the City of Riverside. These veterans were living on the streets, parks, shelters, vehicles and other places not meant for human habitation. Many of these individuals were suffering from physical disabilities, mental illnesses, substance abuse disorders, and lack of social infrastructure. Through collaborative efforts with community partners such as the Department of Veterans' Affairs, the Housing Authority of the County of Riverside, Department of Mental Health, Department of Public Social Service, U.S. Vets and Lighthouse, we were able to provide permanent housing interventions for 89 homeless veterans by December 31, 2015. We exceeded our goal by using a housing-first approach, through coordinated outreach efforts, by creating a prioritized by-name list of all of Veterans, and with weekly case conferencing with our service partners. The team's dedication and efforts were wide-ranging and included activities such as physically assisting with the move-in, providing security deposits and utility assistance, and obtaining various donations from businesses and faith-based organizations within the community to ease in the transition. Through community collaboration, each of us can find a way to show our gratitude and give back to those men and women who proudly served us. In doing so, we can help ensure that veterans have a safe place to permanently call home.

## **25 Cities Initiative**

The 25 Cities Initiative is a key Federal strategy through which 25 cities are receiving technical assistance and are mobilizing local planning efforts and partnerships to create effective systems for aligning housing and services interventions through coordinated systems to end homelessness. Led by the Department of Veterans' Affairs, in partnership with the Department of Housing and Urban Development and the Interagency Council on Homelessness, the goal is to assist 25 cities in accelerating and aligning existing efforts to create coordinated assessment and entry systems, laying the foundation for ending all homelessness (including homelessness among veterans) in these communities. Riverside County is one of 25 cities across the nation selected to participate. This initiative recognizes that ending veteran and chronic homelessness requires strong coordination between all partners and stakeholders who are working together in our community. During regular case conferencing city partners and service providers meet to match homeless individuals and families with available housing resources and rapidly place homeless individuals and families into housing.



Many of our housing programs offer special incentives including paying security deposits, guaranteed rent payments, pre-screening of clients, and intensive case management services. Riverside has created and implemented a coordinated entry system which includes a common assessment tool known as the Vulnerability Index & Service Prioritization Decision Assistance Tool, coordinated outreach efforts, the creation of a by-name list of individuals and families experiencing homelessness throughout the County of Riverside, and weekly case conferencing. Riverside County continues to cultivate partnerships with community members, with service providers, businesses, faith-based organizations, and educational institutions, inviting them to join this ongoing effort to end homelessness in our nation.

### **Riverside Ending Homelessness**

A collaborative effort between Community Connect, Today's Urban Renewal Network, Riverside Downtown Partnership, Arlington Business Partnership, Path of Life Ministries, the Housing Authority of the County of Riverside, and the City, has produced the Riverside Homeless Reduction and Prevention Strategy Five-Year Plan. The Five-Year plan sets forth focused strategies to help individuals and families move toward self-sufficiency. The Riverside City Council formally adopted the Five-Year plan in late 2012. This Five Year Plan is attached for your reference. Additional information can also be found at the Riverside Ending Homelessness website ([www.endhomeless.info](http://www.endhomeless.info))

This Five Year plan launched the Riverside Ending Homelessness effort, calling for the provision of a comprehensive menu of services from basic needs to employment, education and housing. We are making progress toward this goal, but still have a long way to go. We have created the Riverside Ending Homelessness non-profit and established its governing board of directors from the spectrum of the community. We have seeded the Riverside Ending Homelessness Fund and continue to help it grow. We have a plan for expansion of basic services at the Hulen Campus and are now undertaking a fund raising effort for the \$3,000,000 needed for expansion.

My verbal testimony will focus on the Riverside Ending Homelessness effort.

### **Regional Effort**

Building upon the positive momentum created through the City's work to end veteran homelessness, the City is actively reaching out to all neighboring jurisdictions in Western Riverside County to encourage the development of a regional plan that more broadly addresses homelessness.





Recognizing that homelessness is not a condition unique to any one jurisdiction, the City will invite representatives from each jurisdiction in Spring 2016 to help craft a plan through a collaborative development process that not only identifies the challenges faced but builds upon the efforts currently being undertaken by each jurisdiction. It is the City's hope that the resulting plan will strengthen working relationships and serve as a foundation for improved cooperation throughout the region.

### **Into the Future**

All of the partners and service providers are dedicated, passionate and committed to ending homelessness. Staff from the Department of Housing and Urban Development and the Department of Veterans' Affairs are always helpful and responsive. There is always so much opportunity for improvement. A few items that we suggest that would assist current efforts to help to end chronic homelessness include:

1. Mandate implementation of Evidence Based Case Management in any program receiving federal funds and provide the necessary funding to allow for its effective inclusion. It is difficult for many clients to acclimate to indoor living. The Critical Time Intervention model, which has 3 phases of case management, has demonstrated to have a 90 percent housing retention rate.
2. Incentivize a regional approach and coordination of homeless services to encourage local governments to work together.
3. Incentivize landlords and hotels/motel establishments to provide 30-90 day emergency housing vouchers. There's a shortage of landlords due to the stigma attached to housing programs including the Housing Choice Voucher Program. It is important for our community leaders to reach out to rental and realtor associations, property management companies and private owners to educate them on how service providers have restructured their housing process. Five years ago, we (meaning housing providers) were placing clients in inappropriate housing programs. It's important to recognize our flaws and most importantly identify what we have done, collaboratively, to restructure our program requirements and develop a coordinated system that better serves our clients and landlords.
4. Create a mitigation fund for landlords willing to take a chance on renting to our veterans.





5. Provide motel vouchers so desperately needed for those veterans that absolutely refuse to enter the shelter. We will continue to lose veterans if we cannot temporarily provide them with a place to stay.
6. Provide incentives to large and small businesses to hire formerly homeless veterans.
7. Provide funding for housing navigator positions.
8. Provide a method of recognizing organizations that partner with local governments/regional partnerships to end veteran homelessness.
9. Provide funding dedicated for capital improvements and operational expenses for facilities that provide coordinated services and meet basic needs.
10. Maintain and expand existing program, as they are valuable and needed.

If we are dreaming about truly being able to end homelessness for any person or the homeless population, then we propose the creation of a new program with an added value.

Following the life of a person suffering from homelessness from the street to housing success can give us a guide to a new potential effort. Would it be possible for Housing and Urban Development to join efforts with Veterans' Affairs to create a holistic program aimed at ending homelessness?

Can we expand the Supportive Housing Program to include allowing for actual production of affordable housing units appropriate for the formerly chronically homeless along with a mandated case management system and partnered with housing and employment navigation? Can Veterans Affairs also take on that expanded Supportive Housing Program example and create a similar program dedicated for the homeless veterans? Can we create a Housing First Supportive Homeless Program?

Success in the Mayor's Challenge and the 25 Cities Initiative effort proved that a housing first model is effective but also demonstrated the efficiency required of the holistic menu of supportive services. While permanent supportive housing with case management is effective and HOME program production of affordable housing is valuable, they are not enough. We cannot sacrifice the delivery of housing navigation and supportive services. Housing navigation and supportive services are key because they are able to introduce the person in need to the opportunity available.



We have seen firsthand what is possible when regional coordinated efforts and a full spectrum of resources are aligned and focused on a specific need. We can engage a team of dedicated and qualified professionals to help guide individuals and families through every stage, from the street to a home. This represents a genuine effort to effectively implement the Housing First model and is not a band aide approach dependent on overnight shelter beds.

The new program needs to address tangible barriers to housing by focusing on the individual's immediate and basic needs and offer multiple opportunities for contact with caring housing navigators, case managers, medical providers, education consultants, employment trainers and mental health professionals while consistently increasing the availability of affordable housing units to increase the chances for success.

To aid the transition into long-term housing stability, we could provide funding for an employment program aimed at empowering individuals to obtain the necessary skillset to successfully reenter the workforce and sustain gainful employment.

To be successful, the Housing First Supportive Homeless Program would fund the team described above who would be fully dedicated to achieving housing success, where a shelter bed is not the objective. The Housing First Supportive Homeless Program would add funding for development of housing units specifically available to the formerly chronically homeless. The program would fund opportunities to acquire and rehabilitate existing homes within established neighborhoods where community reintegration can thrive. The employment program will inspire the community stakeholders to participate, promote, and stimulate program growth while contributing to the success of the individual.

A partnership between HUD and the VA could launch a new initiative based on the lessons learned in the Mayor's Challenge and pursue a similar success on a larger scale.

We thank the Chairman, Ranking Member, and the Subcommittee Members for your time, attention, and devotion to this cause. As always, we welcome your feedback and questions, and we look forward to continuing to work with this subcommittee, the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs, to ensure the success of all generations of veterans.