

THE PROBLEM:

Less than 1% of the population of the United States ever volunteer to “Support and Defend the Constitution of the United States of America against ALL enemies foreign and domestic.” In doing so, service members become a special part of our nation that are willing to sacrifice their own lives to preserve the freedoms that so many American enjoy on a daily basis.

Over 2 million servicemen and women have been deployed over 3 million times since 9/11 in support of the Global War on Terror (Department of Defense [DoD], 2012). These troops have included Active Duty, Reserve, and National Guard personnel, with Reserve and National Guard personnel being utilized as a part of the operational force structure after 9/11. These numerous deployments are one of the many reasons that our service members decide to make the transition from military life to civilian life and these numerous deployments weigh heavy on the veteran, which in turn manifests itself in many different ways that contribute to the problem of veteran homelessness in the United States.

Active Duty Veterans and their families, as well as transitioned veterans face significant housing challenges. California has the largest number of veterans’ homelessness in the United States with 9,600 veterans homeless. Homeless veterans in California represent 24% of the National Homeless Veteran Population.

Many Veterans do not have stable housing after they separate from the Military, and many housing markets in California, it is difficult, if not impossible, for Military families and even single service members that might have once enjoyed Military Housing or barracks, to transition to the civilian housing market.

- Only 54 % of pre-9/11 veterans and 35% of post 9/11 veterans lined up housing after the military in the San Francisco Area;
- Only 10% of pre-9/11 veterans and 18% of pre-9/11 veterans reported being homeless in Orange County;
- Over a 25% of military veterans reported that they lacked housing in the past 2 years in Los Angeles according to HUD.

1.5 million veteran households suffered severe housing costs in 2011 and it has only become worse.

According to Los Angeles Housing Authority, HUD-VASH housing vouchers have the lowest success rate among the housing vouchers that the Authority issues.

“Success” is defined as placing the voucher recipient in a rental unit. The success rate for the Los Angeles Housing Authority’s for non-veteran housing is 67%. The success rate for HUD-VASH vouchers for veterans drops to 33%.

This is unacceptable for our veterans and changes need to be made to address the issue.

San Diego County has one of the highest population of veterans in the United States and with an estimated 250,000 Veterans. Most of those Veterans choose to stay in San Diego County after retiring from the military or transitioning from the service and many such as myself return to their roots here, in San Diego.

I personally retired from the United States Army in Texas in 1996 but returned to my home, here in San Diego. Transitioning from the military to civilian life was very difficult after a 20-year career in the military. Although, retired with a pension, I was faced with the difficulty of translating my military skill-set to the civilian world for job possibilities and securing housing for myself and my family. I was able to do so but so many veterans today cannot.

It was a different time from when I retired in 1996 to present day transitions for service members in San Diego County.

It is estimated that there are approximately 1,400 homeless veterans on the streets of San Diego.

The question becomes, "Is ending Veteran homelessness possible in states with the highest incidence (e.g., California and Washington), especially since some areas have seen an *increase* in homelessness?"

Answering that question is very complicated because many variables factor into that question.

One of the variables is the "**HUD-VASH** Program that combines the Department of Housing and Urban Development (**HUD**), Housing Choice Voucher (HCV) rental assistance for homeless veterans and their families with case management and clinical services provided by the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) at its medical centers and in the community."

Here lies one of the problems with the program, "Eligibility" as defined on the Veterans Affairs Website; "Veterans who are appropriate for this program (should read, "Any Veteran") must be VA health care eligible Veterans." VA makes that determination.

Most healthy veterans and their and their families never apply for their veteran benefits as part of their transition from the military. Others that have been wounded or injured during the service often are provided with a Veterans Service Officer to complete their benefits package as they transition from the military.

Those service members that never apply to the VA are not in the VA system. When they run into difficulties and when they become homeless, the VA can't help them with HUD-VASH.

PROPOSED SOLUTIONS:

- There needs to be a “Hand Off” between the *Military Personal System* to the *VA Medical System* to prevent this from happening so the service member is in the VA System and able to deal with any difficulties, such as veteran homelessness.
- There also needs to be a program that is part of the service members transition process when they leave the service, a Veteran Service Officer should be assigned to the service member to aid that veteran in insuring that his or her information is in the VA System.

“**Success**” needs to be to help prevent and preempt veteran’s homelessness and that means providing a smooth transition with all available resources for the transitioning veterans and their families and also a safety net of available resources when life takes a wrong turn for that veteran.

Other variables are the job market, the housing market (to include available low-income housing), and mental health issues including PTSD. All these variables factor into answering the veteran’s homelessness issue.