

**STATEMENT OF
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DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS (VA)
BEFORE THE
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
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Good Morning, Chairman Levin, Ranking Member Bilirakis, and distinguished Members of the Subcommittee. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today on the topic of Veteran homelessness, the challenges faced by homeless women Veterans, and the risk factors and unique challenges faced by all homeless Veterans with respect to nutrition, employment, and criminal justice.

James A. Haley Veterans' Hospital (JAHVH) is committed to improving Veteran outcomes and providing Veterans access to comprehensive homeless programs, services, and resources. We also provide Veterans, including those who are at-risk of or experiencing homelessness, with a full spectrum of services designed to meet their unique needs. JAHVH is committed to ending homelessness among Veterans. Our focus is threefold:

- Conducting coordinated outreach to proactively seek out Veterans in need of assistance;
- Connecting homeless and at-risk Veterans with housing solutions, health care, community employment services, and other required supports; and
- Collaborating with Federal, state, and local agencies; employers; housing providers; faith-based and community non-profit organizations; and others to expand employment and affordable housing options for Veterans exiting homelessness.

Introduction

JAHVH is accredited by The Joint Commission and has 21 programs accredited by the Commission on Accreditation of Rehabilitation Facilities (CARF). JAHVH is in Tampa, Florida with Community-Based Outpatient Clinics (CBOC) located in Hernando, Hillsborough, Pasco, and Polk Counties, including the new South Hillsborough Outpatient Clinic that opened May 2019. Additionally, JAHVH will begin serving Veterans in Citrus County when it takes administrative control of the Lecanto CBOC beginning in October 2019. The number of Veterans in Tampa and surrounding counties is estimated to be over 230,000. The hospital is comprised of 499 operating beds, including medical and surgical inpatient, acute psychiatry, pain/rehabilitation units, and a community living center. JAHVH is also one of five Polytrauma Centers and when combined with our 100-bed Michael Bilirakis DVA Spinal Cord Injury Center, it is the largest Federal rehabilitation center. In Fiscal Year (FY) 2018, JAHVH treated 97,045 unique Veteran and Active Duty patients with 11,720 admissions and more than 1.4

million outpatient visits – of which about 129,000 were performed just down the road at the New Port Richey Outpatient Clinic.

Policy Issues Related to Veterans Homelessness (Risk Factors)

According to the 2018 Point in Time (PIT) Count (the most recent publicly available data), Tampa and its surrounding counties reported a total of 2,376 homeless individuals, of which 411 (11 percent) identify as Veterans. Veteran status and character of discharge are not verified during the PIT. Of those who identify as Veterans, 174 were sheltered and 237 were unsheltered. The total number of homeless Veterans in the region decreased by 1 percent since the 2017 PIT count. Since 2011, the region's overall number of homeless Veterans has decreased by 72 percent. This doesn't include Hernando County since PIT data is combined with Citrus, Hernando, Lake, and Sumter Counties for years except in 2019, which recorded 5 unsheltered and 2 sheltered Veterans in Hernando County.

VA's Homeless Veteran programs comprise the largest integrated network of homeless treatment and assistance services in the Nation. As a component of this network, JAHVH strives to provide a continuum of service—from outreach to permanent housing—to our homeless Veteran population. JAHVH partners with local communities to offer a wide array of special programs and initiatives designed to help homeless Veterans live as self-sufficiently and independently as possible.

Over the past 5 years, VA and its partners have made a concerted effort to collaborate at the Federal level to ensure strategic use of resources to end Veteran homelessness. Coordinated Entry Systems (CES) were developed to provide a systematic approach that is needed at the community level to ensure resources are being used effectively and Veterans in that community are offered the resources he or she needs to end their homelessness. The CES framework is designed to promote community-wide commitment to the goal of ending homelessness and efficiently using community-wide resources (including VA resources) for any Veteran experiencing homelessness.

At the local level, we collaborate with Federal, state, and local agencies; employers; housing providers; faith-based and community nonprofits; and others to expand employment and affordable housing options for Veterans exiting homelessness. The JAHVH Health Care for Homeless Veterans (HCHV) program fully participates in the CESs throughout all our counties and will expand engagement to Citrus County in FY 2020.

A priority of our HCHV is to break the cycle of homelessness using a variety of community resources, including permanent supportive housing programs; transitional housing programs; prevention and diversion programs; rapid-rehousing programs; substance use treatment programs; medical and mental health services; employment services; and/or case management. Veteran sub-populations served range from those who are newly homeless and can self-resolve, to those who need temporary housing with short-term intensive services, to those who have severe mental health and/or

substance use disorders and require ongoing supportive services to maintain permanent housing.

Our HCHV manages a wide array of Homeless Veteran programs including those focused on the following:

1. Conducting coordinated outreach to seek out Veterans in need of assistance. Including those focused on the following:

- JAHVH has outreach social workers who provide services at our VA clinics. The Outreach staff work alongside community partners, such as Supportive Services for Veteran Families (SSVF) program outreach teams. The outreach teams respond to calls from the National Call Center for Homeless Veterans and work directly with social workers from our hospital and CBOC locations.
- JAHVH has an extensive Veterans Justice Outreach (VJO) program. Staff provide outreach services in local jails to justice-involved Veterans. A few of the jails have established pods to keep Veterans centrally located, which assists in more localized assessments and interventions. Individualized services are offered with an effort to assist in discharge planning to prevent homelessness upon release. VJO specialists staff Veterans Treatment Courts with an effort to support justice-involved Veterans engaged in treatment services.
- And JAHVH participates in community stand-down events such as the annual three-day Pasco County Annual Homeless Stand-Down and the City of Tampa's Operation Reveille.

2. Another area of focus is connecting homeless and at-risk Veterans with housing solutions, health care, community employment services, and other required supports. JAHVH offers a variety of services to homeless Veterans and/or Veterans at risk for homelessness. These programs include the following:

- Department of Housing and Urban Development-VA Supportive Housing Program (HUD-VASH), offering permanent supportive housing; Grant and Per Diem (GPD), offering transitional housing and program services; Contracted Residential Services Programs (CRS), offering specialty transitional housing and program services such as Recuperative Care and Safe Haven; Outreach, providing street-based and clinic-based outreach services, as well as responding to the National Homeless Call Center; Homeless - Patient Aligned Care Team, offering primary care services to homeless Veterans; and VJO and Veterans Treatment Court programs. We collaborate with adjunct programs, such as SSVF to ensure Veteran accessibility to prevention, rapid resolution, and rapid rehousing programs.
- JAHVH also participates in the S.A.V.E. (signs, ask, validate, encourage, and expedite) program, a partnership between our HCHV and Suicide Prevention Program. Homeless program staff will provide suicide prevention training to community partners about this vulnerable population.

- We have a Homeless Veterans Community Employment Services (HVCES) program that connects Veterans to local employers and assists Veterans through individual and group services to access competitive employment opportunities. HCHV staff refer Veterans to VA's Therapeutic Supported Employment Services Program and Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment programs. Staff also link Veterans to the Homeless Veterans Reintegration Programs, a Department of Labor-funded program offered by local grantees.

3. In addition, JAHVH HCHV has actively participated in past local community initiatives such as the 25 Cities Initiative. These community partners have been strong partners in our efforts and we appreciate their contributions to our Veterans' health and welfare. JAHVH has worked with our community partners for more than 30 years. Ending Veteran homelessness depends heavily upon collaborative, joint efforts from community agencies and local governments. Some of our local partners include the following:

- **Permanent supportive housing:** JAHVH HCHV program collaborates with Hernando, Hillsborough, Pasco, and Polk Housing Authorities, HUD, and Project-Based housing organizations contracted to offer HUD-VASH units, such as Steps Forward and Volunteers of America.
- **Permanent housing programs:** JAHVH HCHV collaborates with Tampa Hillsborough Homeless Initiative, and local SSVF programs, including, St. Vincent DePaul and Tampa Crossroads.
- **Transitional Housing programs:** JAHVH HCHV collaborates with Agency for Community Treatment Services (ACTS), Steps to Recovery, Tampa Crossroads (Athena House), and Volunteers of America.
- **CRS Programs:** JAHVH HCHV collaborates with Circle of Veterans, New Beginnings, Salvation Army and Steps to Recovery.
- **VJO:** JAHVH HCHV collaborates with County Sheriff Departments, County Jails, Circuit Courts (each County has a Veterans Treatment Court), State Attorney, and Public Defenders.
- **Outreach:** JAHVH HCHV collaborates with Homeless Community of Care (CoC), Tampa Crossroads, Saint Vincent DePaul, local Police Departments, Salvation Army, New Beginnings, Steps To Recovery, and Circle of Veterans.
- **Stand Down:** JAHVH collaborates with local County Homeless CoC's for Stand Down events.
- **Operation Reveille:** JAHVH collaborates with Tampa Hillsborough Homeless Initiative for Operation Reveille events.
- **Coordinated Entry System:** JAHVH HCHV collaborates with the local Continuum of Care Councils and is an active member of these councils.
- **Other non-profit organizations providing goods and services:** JAHVH HCHV collaborates with the Knights of Columbus, AmVets, Feeding Tampa Bay, and American Legion.

These community partners have been strong partners in our efforts, and we appreciate their contributions to our Veterans' health and welfare.

Homeless Women Veterans

The women Veteran population is growing. In FY 2018, JAHVH saw a 19 percent increase in women Veteran patients from the previous 2 years. JAHVH offers services to women Veterans in the Tampa Crossroads (Athena House) GPD program. The local emergency shelter offers emergency shelter beds to women Veterans. JAHVH staff have established relationships with the shelter program staff and are able to assist with referrals for women Veterans when beds are available. Our HCHV collaborates closely with the Women Veterans Program at JAHVH, which offers resources to women Veterans, and connects them to specialty care for medical and mental health services.

VA has made significant progress serving women Veterans in recent years, but homelessness among women Veterans remains an important concern and focus. Women Veterans can face many challenges when returning to civilian life, including raising children on their own and dealing with the psychological after effects of events such as military sexual trauma, employment, and housing barriers. Local Communities across the Nation are continuing to align resources to address these unique challenges. The following VA Women's Health services programs are engaged to support a systematic and coordinated approach to care:

- **Women Veteran Program Managers (WVPM)** are located at every VA Medical Center (VAMC). WVPMs help coordinate all the services that women Veterans may need. Services include primary care, pregnancy care, psychiatric care and sexual trauma counseling, inpatient medical/surgical care, programs for homeless women Veterans, and quality of care issues.
- **Military Sexual Trauma (MST)** is the term used by VA to refer to sexual assault or repeated, threatening sexual harassment experienced during military service. Homeless women Veterans who use VA health care have higher rates of experiencing MST compared to all women Veterans who use VA health care. MST-related health care for physical and mental health conditions is available free of charge at every VA facility for eligible persons. There are MST Coordinators at every VAMC who can connect Veterans who have experienced MST to VA health care programs and services.

Mental Illness

Secretary Wilkie recognizes Veterans who are homeless are a high-risk population for suicide and has made suicide prevention one of his top priorities.

VA's National Center on Homelessness among Veterans published research in 2018 (https://www.va.gov/HOMELESS/nchav/research/HERS6_Suicide.asp) that found homelessness is associated with an increased rate of all-cause mortality and of suicide in Veterans. A study by John McCarthy highlighted at the VA Homeless Evidence and Research Synthesis Roundtable Proceedings in 2018 found that the suicide rate among Veterans with homelessness in the past year was 81.0 per 100,000 as compared to

Veterans without recent history of homelessness with a rate of 35.8 suicides per 100,000.

Because suicide prevention is one of the Secretary's top priorities, VA Homeless Programs are required to collaborate with Suicide Prevention programs using the S.A.V.E. program to cross-train homeless program staff on suicide prevention programs and to enable homeless program staff to train community providers and first responders on suicide and suicide prevention. Additionally, regular meetings occur to review high-risk Veterans to discuss and develop appropriate treatment plans to address risk factors. JAHVH has staff that meet with the Suicide Prevention Coordinator monthly. Staff involved in this effort are working towards providing formal training to local GPD and Contract Bed Providers as well as other Veteran community partners and first responders.

Affordable Housing

VA continues to promote the establishment of affordable and permanent supportive housing and works with all partners to encourage efforts aimed at financing and developing additional housing stock to address the market factors. JAHVH's Homeless Program is working with local housing authorities to open project-based housing units for the HUD-VASH program. The first project came online in 2015, with an additional project in 2016. JAHVH's Homeless Program is currently working with Housing Authorities in Pasco and Hillsborough Counties for two additional housing projects.

Criminal Justice History

Studies of Veterans receiving VA homeless services have shown that 65 percent have a history of incarceration in prison or jail. Criminal justice histories create barriers—in addition to those noted above—to permanent housing, employment, education, and other resources, further limiting VA's ability to help homeless Veterans access these resources. This limitation is particularly acute for Veterans with histories of sexual offenses, for whom barriers to critical resources imposed by Federal, state, and local authorities pervade most areas of life. VA serves Veterans with criminal justice histories in its own programs (e.g., HUD-VASH) and facilitates Veterans' access to legal services, which may offer opportunities for record expungement; however, access barriers for those with criminal justice histories continue to limit the ability of many Veterans to take advantage of non-VA resources.

Employment

The lack of employment opportunities and services that mitigate barriers to employment will adversely impact housing stability and community integration for formerly homeless Veterans. Without enough income, transitioning homeless Veterans will not be able to exit homelessness into permanent housing successfully. As mentioned above, VA's HVCES staff work closely with community partners and VA Medical Facilities to ensure that a range of employment services are accessible to Veterans who have experienced homelessness.

VA continues to support Vocational Development Specialists who are embedded in homeless program teams and serve as Employment Specialists and Community Employment Coordinators. In addition, HVCES program staff ensure that Veterans who have experienced homelessness, including chronically homeless Veterans, have access to a range of employment services that complement existing medical center-based employment services and are a bridge to employment opportunities and resources in the local community.

- In April 2018, the HVCES program set a national goal of reaching 10,000 unique instances of employment (each episode of employment gained by a Veteran) between April 1, 2018, and March 31, 2019.
- As of April 1, 2019, there were over 21,000 unique instances of employment, more than double the employment goal for Veterans engaged in or who exited from VHA Homeless programs or Services.

Data Sharing

Due to the transient nature of this population, a loss of access to Veteran health care information may also lead to inaccurate master by-name lists of Veterans experiencing homelessness in local communities and local resource planning as a result. Improving data sharing processes between VA and communities will ensure that Veterans experiencing homelessness have access to available services and resources. The risk of not improving data sharing processes will impact community's ability to successfully assess needs of homeless Veterans and match services to meet those needs.

Reducing Veteran Homelessness

Reducing the number of Veterans who become homeless continues to be a vital step towards VA's goal of ending homelessness among Veterans. VA is working to improve predictive strategies and deploying evidence-based practices designed to identify and prevent homelessness. VA has begun a national rollout of the Rapid Resolution Initiative which expands on a pilot program begun in FY 2018 to reunify Veterans with family members or friends as an alternative to shelter entry. SSVF is supporting mediation training by conducting free train-the-trainer programs for grantees around the country supported by an SSVF technical assistance grant. The train-the-trainer approach literally trains grantee staff to become trainers, so they can educate other staff in their agency and the broader community on these mediation techniques. VA Community Entry Specialists have also been invited to these trainings so VAMC staff are able to join this collaborative effort. In addition, SSVF has provided grantees with additional funding so they can support education for their staff on these techniques. Using mediation training and modest financial incentives through the SSVF program, VA is working with HUD, the U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness, and other Federal agencies to create policies and train community-based staff to support implementation of this model. VASDHS SSVF providers have been working with VASDHS HCHV to implement the Rapid Resolution program locally in FY 2020.

Unique Challenges

Nutrition, the Criminal Justice System, Health Care, and Employment

Significant progress has been made in preventing and ending Veteran homelessness. The number of Veterans experiencing homelessness in the United States has declined by nearly half since 2010, as more than 700,000 Veterans and their family members have been permanently housed or prevented from becoming homeless. Although significant progress has been made, homeless and at-risk Veterans are faced with many challenges. VA has taken the following actions to address these challenges.

Nutrition

In 2018, VA partnered with Feeding America with a shared goal and commitment to Veterans who require immediate hunger assistance in support of ending Veteran food insecurity. Through this partnership, VA and Feeding America have worked together to support participating Feeding America network food banks and VA medical facilities, through the development of pop-up food pantries at 18 VAMCs. Through these pantries, more than 600,000 meals have been served to more than 30,000 Veterans and their family members who were experiencing food insecurities or those at risk of experiencing food insecurity. This partnership is growing as more VAMCs set up pantries through this partnership.

Veterans Justice Outreach

VA serves justice-involved Veterans through two dedicated national programs, both prevention-oriented components of VA's Homeless programs: Health Care for Reentry Veterans (HCRV) and VJO. Known collectively as the Veterans Justice Programs, HCRV and VJO facilitate access to needed VA health care and other services for Veterans at all stages of the criminal justice process, from initial contact with law enforcement through community reentry following incarceration.

Part of the continuum of services offered by JAHVH is the VJO program. This program provides resources, referrals, and case management services by VJO Specialists to Veterans with a variety of justice-involved needs, ranging from those participating in Treatment Court to those who are incarcerated, those that may be on probation/parole, and for those in need of homeless court advocacy.

Each year, we participate in two Veteran outreach courts. One in conjunction with the Pasco County stand-down and one we co-host with the Hillsborough County 13th Judicial Court at our Primary Care Annex. Outstanding legal issues can be addressed such as active misdemeanor warrants, fines, legal fees, court costs, and ordinance violations. In addition, we hold Legal Clinics for Veterans monthly to cover Family Law, Landlord/Tenant, Bankruptcy, Expungement, and Civil Matters. JAHVH VJO Specialists are assigned to provide case management services to Veterans involved in the following VTCs: Hernando County (5th Judicial Circuit), Hillsborough (13th), Pasco (6th), and Polk (10th).

The VJO program works closely with local police and Sherriff departments. Many Veterans are linked by the VJO Specialists to VA-funded GPD programs, SSVF, and HUD-VASH programs, as well as JAHVH alcohol and drug treatment programs as part of their probation/parole. A VJO Specialist provides case management services to ensure greater success and to help reduce recidivism. The VJO program works closely with sheriff departments in local county detention center to offer information, resources, and participates in discharge planning for incarcerated Veterans to ensure that Veterans are linked to programs to address issues related to housing, substance use, medical care, mental health, and employment programs prior to their release. Hillsborough and Pasco County Detention Centers have allocated resources for the creation of Veteran pods that help streamline Veteran services to incarcerated Veterans.

The Veteran's participation in these programs and other VA treatment is often a part of a Veteran's case plan and probation expectations. VJO case management services assist the Veteran in navigating the Court's expectations and gaining access to treatment. This has helped ensure that more Veterans successfully complete the VTC programs in each county.

Expanding Access

H.R. 2398 would amend the United States Housing Act of 1937 and title 38, United States Code (U.S.C.), to include those who are ineligible for other VA Homeless programs authorized by 38 U.S.C. 2011, 2012, 2013, 2044, and 2061. As VA expressed in a letter to the Subcommittee on May 31, 2019, VA supports the expansion of eligibility in section 1(b) of the bill, although we note that the amendments made by section 1(a) of the bill are unnecessary because there is no eligibility issue on the HUD authorization side. This legislation is designed to match HUD-VASH eligibility criteria to that of the GPD and SSVF programs. Although VA supports this proposed legislation as it will allow additional vulnerable chronically homeless Veterans to receive much-needed HUD-VASH vouchers and case management, we note that in expanding eligibility, VA and HUD will need to coordinate to ensure responsible program implementation in order to maintain continued quality of care and success of the HUD-VASH program.

VA also supports H.R. 716 if amended, as the bill is similar to a legislative proposal in VA's FY 2020 budget request. VA testified on this bill at a July 19, 2019, Subcommittee hearing.

Conclusion

Across VA and locally at JAHVH, we are committed to providing the high-quality care our Veterans have earned and deserve. We continue to improve access and services to meet the needs of Veterans. We support all efforts to increase Homeless Veteran HUD-VASH prioritization eligibility. We appreciate the opportunity to appear before you today and the resources Congress provides VA to care for Veterans.