



Testimony of Executive Director of the Florida Department of Veterans' Affairs Captain Daniel W. "Danny" Burgess

Thank you for the opportunity to present this testimony before the Committee on Veterans' Affairs Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity as we seek to address ways to provide the assistance Florida veterans have earned and deserve for their service to this nation.

As the newly appointed Executive Director of the Florida Department of Veterans' Affairs, I felt the need to look and find ways we as a state could address gaps in veteran services and work together to solve some of the most crucial and time sensitive issues that face veterans today. The mission began on March, 29, 2019 and continues today. The information I present to you below is the combination of knowledge from leadership on the state, federal, city and county level as well as civic groups, veteran service organizations and charities across the state who have worked together over the past 5 months to address many important topics including the veteran homelessness crisis.

Before jumping into specifics, I want to refresh everyone on the fact that the federal government utilizes the term functional zero when addressing homelessness matters – this term meaning that for veterans who want to come in off the street, there are ample resources to affect them doing so. To that end some good news. While Florida has a long way to go, as of August 5, 2019, Florida has five counties, and three communities that have declared functional zero for homelessness (Flagler County, Miami-Dade County, Fort Myers/Lee, Punta Gorda, Charlotte County, Volusia County/Daytona Beach).

Homelessness among veterans in Florida has been effectively cut in half since 2011. A significant cause for Florida's substantial decrease in the rate of homelessness among veterans are national initiatives to end veteran homelessness. In Florida, millions of dollars have been invested through VA Supportive Services for Veteran Families grants, as well as HUD VA Supportive Housing (VASH) vouchers that provide long-term rental assistance to help homeless veterans with high needs obtain and sustain permanent housing. Florida's Council on Homelessness's 2019 report conveys: The annual Point-In-Time (PIT) Count, completed over a 24-hour period in January 2019, offers a snapshot of homelessness in Florida and nationally (available in Appendix III, Tables 1-7). Within the last year, the number of people experiencing homelessness in Florida decreased by almost four percent since last year's count and by 20 percent since 2015. The number of people experiencing homelessness identified in 2019's count totaled 28,591; amounting to a reduction of 1,126 people since last year's PIT Count. This decrease tells us that the implementation of best practices and targeted housing interventions paired with services are effectively creating successful outcomes in the fight to end homelessness in local communities throughout Florida.

Importantly, while we recognize that homelessness among veterans in Florida is decreasing, we know we can do more. We hope to work with you all to find ways to join Connecticut, Virginia and Delaware and be the next state to join the list of states who have ended veteran homelessness across all counties.

So now, let me go back to my earlier point in my remarks and discuss what the Florida Department of Veterans Affairs discovered regarding homelessness across the state during our Forward March initiative:

The Florida Department of Veterans Affairs (FDVA) chaired an initiative called "FORWARD March." The FDVA core team hosted forums in key cities across seven regions of Florida, namely: Tampa, Pensacola, Jacksonville, Lake Worth/West Palm Beach, Ocala, Miami, Cape Canaveral and Sarasota. Leadership from State, Federal, City and County municipalities, civic and church groups, veteran service organizations and charities operating within these regions participated in workgroups within their area of expertise, one of which was Veteran Homelessness and Community Services.

The Veteran Homelessness and Community Services workgroup focused on the challenges, impacts/gaps, best practices and initiatives, and resources necessary to bring about change to existing conditions. Each subtopic began with a premise statement, and in discussing the challenges across the regions, found quite a few similarities in resolution approaches, programs and processes initiatives instituted, best practices, and resources need to bring about resolution. In each area visited, there was no doubt as the passion and compassion these entities embraced when it comes to assisting Veterans and their family members.

The result of our discussions across the state is that Florida has a host of fragmented veteran services that augment the Federal VA benefits system. That patchwork is local focused, community oriented and effective for its regional population, but often work in silos, separate, distinct, and limited in their focus. Because they are local and inward focused, these groups face issues of adequate funding, lack of proper information dissemination and sharing, lodging and subsistence, and inadequate resources for outreach. They are also insular and thus miss out on the benefits of coordination, mutual assistance and resource sharing. Devoting resources to help fill these gaps will allow FDVA, city and county municipalities, agencies, civic organizations to be more effective. It takes a collective and combined community based effort to resolve these issues.

Veteran Homelessness:

A Florida centric point in time study conducted by the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) on Homelessness in January 2018 and the 2019 Council on Homelessness study showed that an estimated that 31,030 experienced homelessness on any given day. Of that total, 2,757 were family households, **2,543 were Veterans**. This data does not take into account veterans and their family members who are being temporarily sheltered on someone's couch, commonly referred to as "couch surfing." Important is that veterans and their families are rolled up in these dire statistics.

These statistics point to a very telling **problem statement**: Florida has not ended homelessness for Veterans and their families. Tied closely to the issue of Veteran Homelessness is the receipt of community services whether on an emergency or routine basis. This suggests another **problem statement**, that being: Veteran centric community resources are disparately apportioned and distributed across the public and private sector. Ultimately, this subsection of the white paper will not resolve veteran homelessness or community services matters, but will illustrate the regional challenges inherent to transitioning veterans, the gaps/barrier in service(s) provision, the initiatives and best practices being utilized within the various regions, and the resources necessary to bring about resolution. Importantly, it will position community collaboration and communication as the best tool to bring about positive change to current community challenges in these areas.

Veteran homelessness was a challenging and emotional topic for all involved. While all agreed that this was a prevalent and growing problem across Florida, the degree of impact varied, as well as their belief that they could resolve the problem with available resources and within a certain amount of time. Also, that services were extremely limited, and disparate based on gender, family structure (single parent, previously incarcerated veteran with family members, and female veteran with children), characterization of service (honorable, general discharge, other than honorable, and dishonorable discharge). Importantly, they all believed that resolution lied in (less restrictive) funding, standardization of the definition of a veteran, and collaborating, communication and actually sharing resources to meet all veterans need.

Challenges to ending homelessness in Florida:

How to resolve homelessness appears to be a matter of defining or characterizing homelessness among our Veterans and providing services irrespective of the veteran's type of discharge (honorable, other than honorable, under honorable conditions, or bad conduct discharge).

In addition, in defining homeless status, many veterans seeking services are not homeless by the definition of homeless – as they are “couch surfing” or temporarily sheltering on someone's couch. Also, most homeless programs have no provisions to support single veterans with children, especially female veterans, and those who have run afoul of the law. Conversely, those who are eligible for housing find that there is little to no safe affordable housing available for their particular situation. When it came to landlords, those whose property may have been damaged in some way, refused to rent to Veterans as there was no funding mechanism to mitigate the damage. In gathering data across the seven regions, we found key issues to be:

- A shortage or lack of financial resources and availability of ‘safe’ affordable housing, including but not limited to:
 - Subsidies/Vouchers to supplement or offset the high cost of housing coupled with long term landlord engagement to maintain housing
 - Address the shortage of participating landlords; and restrictive housing, as well as the lack of housing and/or funding to create affordable housing
 - Limited shelter/lodging for female Veterans with children; as well as single male Veterans with children
 - No transitional programs for incarcerated veterans to assist them in getting reestablished in society.

- Housing and Urban Development-Veterans Administrations Supportive Housing (HUD_VASH) voucher programs amounts are stagnant/decreasing - - don't keep pace with the fluctuating prices of housing
 - Lack of financial resources for move-in costs (i.e. 1st, month, last month and security deposit(s), as well as utility deposits - - items not covered by the HUD-VASH vouchers
- No statewide resources for veterans transitioning from services to civilian life
- Lack of agreement among providers on the use of available funds
- Lack of city participation in community service and outreach programs
- Limited supportive services are available in most cities, counties and communities and those supportive service work in their own silos and leading to unnecessary duplication of efforts; reduced opportunities for education/sharing of information among service providers. Agencies and service organizations providing these services must move away from a - my program - approach to my community program approach.
- The definition of Homelessness differs at each level of government (federal, State, county, and city which significantly impacts resource allocation. All programs would benefit tremendously from a clearly defined end- state for homelessness.
- Lack of supportive benefits and conversely a lack of awareness and communication of available resources. This shortage of supportive benefits fall into the following areas:
 - Lack of access to mental health care for veterans in conjunction with administering other supportive services.
 - There is a competition among organizations for veterans as programs are productivity or quota driven; also creates a lack of transparency regarding services available and provided.
 - Lack of employment assistance for homeless veterans
 - No centralized resource or process to direct veterans to appropriate assistance and no follow-up process for those who are provided assistance (Veterans seen as a piece of paper vice solving human issues)
 - Limited financial resources for crisis or preventive services
 - Public Awareness and communications issue (root causes must be determined as each area is different (employment, drugs, mental health)
- All regions echoed a concern regarding a comparable living wage to support housing and subsistence. After subsistence vouchers ran out, previously homeless veterans could not find employment that kept pace with housing costs.
- Lack of unified effort to identify veterans. (Census count may possibly identify vets)
- There are associated mental health issues underlying veteran homelessness. Some veterans don't want to leave the confines of the woods. Mental health services are limited and sporadic across Florida.
- Misinformation and guidance regarding available resources – perhaps consider revamping Transition Assistance Programs (TAPS) and similar programs to extend transition assistance for active duty military personnel to 60, 90+ days post service.

Last, finding those veterans will also be difficult as they are transient by nature and a good bit of those refuse, for various reasons, not to come out of the woods.

Gaps/barriers impacting the eradication of Homelessness:

Across the regions assessed, gaps and barriers affecting homelessness followed closely the challenges mentioned above, especially when it came to resources and services provided. So, as not to mention them again, this section will focus on or expound of those mentioned above. Repetitively, income played a key factor in services and creating a gap in the amount of services available. For example, Area Medium Income (AMI) does not equal to the Cost of Living Allowance (COLA). These thresholds disqualified a good segment of Veterans from receiving services that could have alleviated a homeless situation. From a legislative and municipal perspective, there were no policies to mandate a percentage of housing to be dedicated to homelessness initiatives. Gap/barriers repetitively mentioned or listed above included:

- Lack of landlords and ‘safe’ affordable housing including no damage mitigation support for landlords. Also, there was a lack of education on housing. Key concerns included:
 - A lack of affordable housing outside of VA restrictive requirements Housing and Urban Development-Veterans Administrations Supportive Housing (HUD_VASH)
 - Housing choice voucher or similar programs were nonexistent - - rental help only.
 - Lack of landlords willing to accept HUD-VASH vouchers, termed landlord burnout. This landlord burnout stems from housing being trashed or otherwise abused without any recourse
 - Existing housing is typically service animal restrictive. This restriction is applied informally but not officially. Consequently, veteran won’t give up service or support animal; and there are also challenges connecting vet with pet services.
- Lack of legal services and social services for veterans
 - Discharge upgrades (dishonorable discharge, bad conduct discharge) for Veterans ineligible for Veterans Administration services
 - Lack of employment assistance, peer support, and case management
 - “Stovepipe” programs (Community Vs. my organization)
- Transportation shortages: lack of dedicated transportation services to and from appointment areas
- VA systems & community system don’t interface (HOMES/Homeless Management Information System). There is consequently a disconnect between private and VA doctors on claims (claims exams, data, and the like).
 - Mental health services /providers differ by location and are not connected. More specifically there is a disparity between homeless and near homeless services. Needed are:
 - Separate program for spouse and family members
 - Preventive assistance for those who don’t meet income requirements
 - Automation driven services by the VA and access limited by veterans individual resources (phone, computer)
 - Lack of communication to discharged veterans on benefits and services. A solution might be an information or exit package
- There is currently no centralized process to gather data and evaluate for services/”follow-up” (clearing house)
 - Analyze data to determine root cause (Mental health; transportation; education; or physical health
 - Specialized services needed – current programs cater to a particular group while others fall through the gaps.
- 211 Initiative not promoted well

- Resources provided by 211 may not be available
- Trainer/mentor/counselor is needed in each prison facility to get Veterans needed help
 - Provides for early assessment
 - Community Forum for vets issues that meets periodically with due outs by subsequent meetings. Key to success of this venture is frequent meetings with proactive measures for veterans before incarceration/before imbedding them into the community
- Guardianship Program with resources to service needy veterans and family members
 - Guardian Ad Litem/Peer to peer level services
 - Help vets manage their compensation and pension
 - Also, assist with doctor management issues
- State of Florida lacks a Welcome Packet for departing military – Florida-centric packet.

Initiatives Agencies or Organizations currently working on:

Initiatives varied across the regions as some services did not exist in all areas. Also, initiatives were at different stages of development, so a clear assessment of their productivity was not available. Important is that most initiatives were grass roots with limited provision for expansion across counties or the State for that matter.

- Veteran Integrated Services Network 8 (VISN8): Supportive Services for Veterans and Families; HUD-VASH, and MyFloridaVet line funded by VISN8
- Florida 211
- Mission United
- Florida Veterans Foundation; Floridaveterans.org
- Continuum of Care (CoC) Initiatives (Share Information); moving from CoC to my State
- Stand Downs Reboot
- Sharing transportation resources – communication
- Homeless Outreach T3AM
- Community collaboration
 - Homeless Management Information System -open system
 - Coordinated intake of Veterans.
- Housing First model
- Residential based certifications
- By Name List/Case conferences
- Her Total Wellness Initiative
- Standdowns – organizations collaborating formally and informally (network); Mini stand-downs
- 100 vets off the street in 111 days initiative (joint VA/Palm Beach County/HUD/Standdown House collaborative initiative)
- VA socialworkers (referrals)
- VA Domiciliary Project Initiative at VA Hospital
- Adult Health Day Care
- Coordinated entry/by name list (VA and community initiative)

- Build for Zero: “Community Solutions” partner with community partners) assessing best practices for homeless community members
 - Goal is functional zero by year end
- Point in time count of homeless Veterans and families
- Shared Housing - - two or more vets sharing housing
- Community coalitions forming to provide funding for emergency services
- Food Banks
- VA Expanded case management programs
- Survey of veteran’s needs – survey/study
 - Mental health needs
 - Housing needs
- County Veteran Services Officers – roving veterans seminar
- Sarasota Jail – Veterans pod created at facility - - keeps veterans together while incarcerated, while providing a transition program
- Gulf Coast Partnership – “Continuum of Care”
- Collaboration – Sarasota & Manatee County on veterans, their families and related issues.
- Punta Gorda Police Department – trained in veteran intervention
- Homelessness Outreach Teams – trained in veteran interventions

Resources necessary to bring resolution:

Repetitive across all counties was the lack of sufficient financial support to support or enhance existing programs, or to develop new programs or initiatives, especially housing. Also, participants echoed that when financial resources were provided, they were so restrictive that their use was largely prohibitive or restricted to a small segment of the veteran population. Also, that the persons to manage the programs were underpaid and at the macro level, there was no dedicated personnel to coordinate State level support, and systems utilized by the different social service programs did not integrate. Critical also is being able to evaluate success given the resources provided.

- Safe, affordable housing and the creation of housing developments (affordable and near jobs); Affordable safe housing units and participating landlords; housing specialist to work with landlords and companies/organizations; landlord damage mitigation fund, and space allocated for housing (tiny housing)
- Develop a program of monetary incentives for initiatives reaching the programs goal for initiatives or other metrics based programs.
- Mandate a Statewide software system to manage homelessness data and matters (HMIS); HMIS/Homes integration, as well as a Statewide client and data management system
- Develop a State of Florida Level - dedicated think tank to look and develop solutions to Statewide problems/issues impacting our veterans
- Employ gender/specific counselors at agencies, departments, or organizations that have counseling as part of their veterans benefit programs.
- Expand mental health services: expand to include supporting medical and mental health services
- Offer communications mediums as part of Career development; Computer Training/educational resources for Veterans (phones, pagers, etc)

- Expand existing VA education on current programs to reach a more diverse audience, including family members.
- Mobility options (transportation and transport services close to Veterans lodging areas)
- Funding
- Use vacant buildings for safe and secure housing
 - State, city and county provide seed money for this initiative
- Use existing land set asides for affordable housing
- Solicit/use nonprofit resources - - tiny housing
- Definition of homelessness (Define so homeless can move from transitional housing to permanent housing)
- Sustainment resources - - use to assist while families develop income levels to sustain themselves
 - Funding (grants and related subsistence funds)
- Coordinated database; Marketing of resources available; Consolidated database of services/resource index statewide
- Homelessness prevention programming - - one time funding, SSVF assistance
- Education and peer support – follow up and budgeting training
- Access to FEMA resources for Vets
- Manpower/personnel for sustainability (volunteers diminishing)
- Subsidies for aging, homeless, indigent veteran population - assisted living facilities for veterans that require supervised care
- Additional veteran service officers (VSOs) – perhaps place additional VSOs in existing VA clinics
- Policy changes (State & Federal) to allow or expand services to a larger group of Veterans
- Pamphlets for law enforcement/first responders to hand out to veterans with whom they interact
- Public awareness campaign (i.e. Public Service Announcements, billboards, etc.) that is led by veterans, subject matter experts, as well as “boots-on-the-ground) community members
- Messaging to position VSOs as veteran advocates to facilitate greater interaction of veterans who are in need of services and supports

Conclusion

Thank you for the opportunity to submit this testimony on behalf of the Florida Department of Veterans' Affairs for your records. We know this issue is a serious problem facing not only our state, but the country. We look forward to working with the committee and offer our assistance in trying to address the major challenges that face Florida veterans. We also appreciate any additional resources that can be provided to help address the veteran homelessness crisis.