

Congressional Hearing Statement
Mary F. White

I am an Army Veteran; I am also a mother. I became a single mother when my son was one, I also found us to be in a financially burdened situation. At that point, we had become homeless. We couch surfed for a little while before I learned that the VA had programs to help us. I started advocating for myself and that's how I was connected to HUDVASH. Through that process, I was also able to find community organizations such as Saint Vincent DePaul's, Supported Services for Veterans and Families (SSVF), and Boley Centers Federal Employment Grant that offers assistance to homeless Veterans. Saint Vincent DePaul assisted us with finding suitable housing and also the financial aspects of securing and moving into my apartment. Once we had suitable housing HUDVASH was able to take over with a housing voucher and case management. Local non-profit organizations donated furniture, household goods and sometimes food; they even provided Christmas presents for my son. Due to having sustainable housing, I was able to go back to school utilizing G.I. Bill and Vocational Rehabilitation (Chapter 31) benefits. I performed my required Masters Practicum at the James A. Haley VA Medical Center as a social work intern. I graduated with my Masters in Social Work in August, 2018. While attending school and working, I received a voucher to defray childcare costs through the Early Learning Coalition (ELC), which is a very limited resource in the community that HUDVASH was able to refer me too. Without childcare assistance it would have been virtually impossible to succeed. Many single parents remain trapped "in the system" due to this barrier alone.

During this time, in addition to mental and medical health care by the VA, I also worked with the VA's Compensated Work Therapy (CWT) program to try and find employment. I received assistance from Boley Centers, Homeless Veteran's Reintegration program, who assisted with my resume and job readiness. I continue to work with Vocational Rehabilitation employment services and CareerSource's Veteran Employment services to secure a job that will utilize my

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Master's degree. I am currently an Employment Security Representative, with the Department of Economic Opportunity.

All these programs, for me began with HUDVASH. HUDVASH interlinks with a multitude of resources to assist homeless Veterans, connecting us to needed resources. One resource is the Pasco County Housing Authority. They enrolled me into the Family Self-Sufficiency (FSS) and Earned Income Disallowance (EID) programs, which allow me to continue to work towards financial security and independence. I am working with these resources to meet my last treatment plan goal of incoming out of HUDVASH and no longer being eligible.

These programs and resources available to assist homeless Veterans are the reason I am where I am today. I am a single mother with a master's degree and working towards becoming a Licensed Clinical Social Worker. I am able to support my family, and maintain normal living environment for my son. I would not be successful without the assistance from these programs and organizations that help the homeless Veteran population.

Even with these resources, barriers remain a very big reality for struggling Veterans. Transportation is a major barrier. Public transportation in Pasco county is minimal rendering it almost impossible to maintain employment or school attendance without a vehicle. The financial burden is overwhelming and impossible for the homeless. I was blessed to have a vehicle but the fear of repossession was a reality. When my car broke down, and I could not afford repairs, I could have easily been derailed. HUDVASH connected me with Wounded Warriors who paid for car repairs. If they hadn't, I would still be solely relying on these programs for financial security rather than trying to phase out of them. Without reliable transportation Veterans are trapped in the system. There are very few resources to help Veterans obtain or maintain transportation. In Pasco County, there are no shelters or transitional housing opportunities for

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women and children and very limited shelter beds for men. Without short term housing solutions many never have the opportunity to seek permanent housing and independence. Mental health and medical treatment are a real option once someone is stably housed in a program such as HUDVASH. However, for some, no dental resources have resulted in major medical concerns that derail progress towards independence.

I entered into HUDVASH in 2016 and it has taken just under 4 years to get to where I am today. Although I am still a Veteran receiving services through HUDVASH, my aim is to not make it to the 5th year. Instead of being a homeless Veteran family, we are on the path of becoming homeowners with full time employment and being completely self-sufficient.

The resources my son and I utilized are vital to one another, and were possible through various grants and programs that the VA helped me access. I have personally witnessed both sides of these programs. One as a client/recipient of the services, but also while completing my internships at the Tampa, VA. I was able to see the clinical and administrative side of some of these programs. It is my goal to put these experiences to good use and help other veteran's navigate my path and reach their goals as well. None of it would be possible without the funding Congress provides through federal grants, HUD and educational benefits. Additional funding is needed for emergency and transitional housing, transportation and ancillary services that will ultimately save money, as more veteran's become self-sufficient and productive members of their communities.