

Testimony
Of
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before the
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Hearing
Ending Veteran Homelessness
Addressing the issues of homeless veterans in America
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Chairmen Dodd, Ranking Member Shelby, and members of the Subcommittees, on behalf of our Board of Directors, our President Nan Roman, and our thousands of partners across the country, I am honored that you have invited the National Alliance to End Homelessness to testify before you on veteran homelessness. Veteran homelessness is one of the most pressing issues plaguing our nation today, and by moving towards a solution to this problem we are serving these men and women as they have once done for us.

The National Alliance to End Homelessness is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization that was founded in 1983 by a group of leaders deeply disturbed by the appearance of thousands of Americans living on the streets of our nation. We have committed ourselves to finding permanent solutions to homelessness. Our bipartisan Board of Directors and our thousands of nonprofit, faith-based, private and public sector partners across the country devote ourselves to the affordable housing, access to services, and livable incomes that will end homelessness. The Alliance is recognized for its organization and dissemination of

research to encourage best practices and high standards in the field of homelessness prevention and intervention and we wish to share our insights with you today.

As our name implies, our primary focus is ending homelessness, not simply making it easier to live with. We take this idea very seriously. There is nothing inevitable about homelessness among veterans in the United States. We know more about veteran homelessness and how to address it than we ever have before, thanks in part to extensive research. We know a great deal about the pathways into homelessness, the characteristics of veterans who experience homelessness and the interventions and program models which are effective in offering reconnection to community, and stable housing.

This testimony will summarize the research available on homelessness among veterans and the most promising strategies currently successful at addressing this issue in community settings, as well as policy recommendations to implement these strategies to the national scale.

Homelessness Among Veterans

Far too many veterans are homeless in America. In November 2007, the Homelessness Research Institute of the National Alliance to End Homelessness first published *Vital Mission, Ending Homelessness Among Veterans*, quantifying this problem as well as reporting on housing status among veterans. Today, the Alliance is publishing its second annual update to this report, using new analysis and more recent data to deepen our understanding of the issue. Today's update uses data from homelessness counts that took place in early 2008, as well as other sources. The update includes the following findings.

- **131,000 veterans were homeless at a point in time in early 2008.** This number is lower than two years earlier, and it is probable that some reductions had taken place, but

much of the reduction is due to methodological differences. It is also possible that rapidly rising unemployment since early 2008 has increased the number of homeless veterans in more recent months.

- **58 out of every 10,000 veterans are homeless, a ratio more than double the rate of homelessness within the non-veteran population.** This rate varies markedly by state and locality.
- **The demographic of homeless veterans follows the demographic of the overall veteran population:** women represent a small but growing proportion of homeless veterans as well as veterans overall. Veterans aged 55-64 represent 25% of the homeless veteran population and 29% of the overall veteran population.
- **Veteran homelessness tends to be concentrated near military and veteran centers such as military bases and VA medical centers.** Texas, the state with the highest concentration of military bases, is reported to have 9,063 homeless veterans. Along with Louisiana, home to one of the larger VA medical centers nationally, has 3,600 homeless veterans, a rate of 118 homeless veterans to every 10,000 overall Louisiana veteran residents.

Housing Status of Veterans

What all homeless people have in common is the lack of a place to live – homelessness is at base a problem of housing availability and affordability. When we first analyzed this data, we assumed that the disproportionate representation of veterans in the homeless population must be due to the fact that veterans have housing problems. So we looked at the housing situation of veterans more generally, examining the American Community Survey data (for 2005 – the most recent data available at the time of the

research). In fact, we found that, when viewed as a group, veterans can typically afford their monthly housing costs.

But while the average veteran is well housed, there is a subset of veterans who rent housing and have severe housing cost burdens. Those that are most vulnerable and/or face the worst crises, lose their housing, have no other help available, and become homeless.

- In 2005, **467,877 veterans were severely rent burdened and were paying more than 50 percent of their income for rent.**
- Not surprisingly, many of these veterans were **poor**. More than half (55 percent) of veterans with severe housing cost burden fell below the poverty level and 43 percent were receiving foods stamps.
- **California, Nevada, Rhode Island and Hawaii** were the states with the highest percentage of veterans with severe housing cost burden. The **District of Columbia** had the highest rate, with 6.5 percent of veterans devoting more than 50 percent of their income to rent.

We examined the characteristics of this group of veterans paying too much for housing and we found the following.

- Veterans with a **disability** are more likely to have severe housing cost burden. They are twice as likely to have a work disability as other veterans (18 percent versus 9 percent). Similarly, they are twice as likely to have a disability that limits their mobility (20 percent versus 10 percent).
- **Female veterans** are more likely to have housing cost burdens. Although women are only 7 percent of veterans, they represent 13.5 percent of veterans with housing cost burdens. And while 13 percent of them have housing cost burdens, only 10 percent of male veterans have such burdens.

- **Unmarried veterans** are more likely to have cost burdens by a factor of nearly two. 13 percent of veterans who do not have a spouse have severe housing cost burden versus 7 percent of those who are married.
- **Period of service** seems to matter. Veterans who left the military between 1980 and 2003 are less likely than earlier veterans to have housing cost burden. Somewhat surprisingly, older veterans from the Korean War and World War II are more likely to have housing cost burdens. These are comparisons of rate. By sheer size, Vietnam War veterans make up the largest group of those with housing cost burdens.
- **In 2005, approximately 89,553 to 467,877 veterans were at risk of homelessness.** The lower estimate is renters with housing cost burden, living below the poverty level, disabled, living alone, and not in the labor force. The upper estimate is all renters with housing cost burden.

Needed Federal Response

Of all the population groups impacted disproportionately by homelessness, veterans are the one where the federal government has taken direct responsibility for the well-being of the entire group, as it should be. The federal government, through the VA, is in a position to set an example for how to safeguard a vulnerable population from homelessness. At present, however, this is not being accomplished, despite existing programmatic initiatives, and despite the fact that sufficient understanding exists regarding the nature of homelessness and the programmatic and policy responses needed to end it. The rest of this testimony describes what is needed in order to complete this response, and to reach a point

where homelessness among veterans is not only said to be intolerable, but is in fact not tolerated.

Across the country, leading communities have made substantial progress at reducing the number of people who are homeless. The keys to success have become well known:

- Leadership that takes responsibility for achieving results.
- Permanent supportive housing targeted at those who have been homeless the longest and have the most severe disabilities.
- Prevention and rapid re-housing programs that solve people's housing crises, preferably before they become homeless.
- Collaboration with the entire range of systems that impact the problem, around the goal of ending homelessness.

To achieve these ends for veterans, the Alliance recommends the following:

Pass the Homes for Heroes Act (S. 1160) to create a HUD sponsored permanent supportive housing production program. For disabled low income veterans who require ongoing services in order to stay stably housed, permanent supportive housing is a proven solution. This program is a needed companion to the widely popular HUD-VASH program, in that it would help provide housing stock for homeless and at risk veterans.

Continue to expand the HUD-VA Supportive Housing program. This proven program provides rental assistance through HUD's popular Section 8 voucher program; and case management, treatment and support services through the VA. It replicates the highly successful model of permanent supportive housing, getting veterans with the most severe, permanent disabilities off the streets for good. Permanent supportive housing for all veterans who need this level of intensive intervention to escape homelessness will require 60,000 HUD-VASH vouchers and accompanying case management and services. Funding

for 20,000 has already been appropriated, and 10,000 more are included in House and Senate FY2010 appropriations bills.

Give the VA the authority to run larger scale homelessness prevention and rapid re-housing programs. Allowing the VA to provide homeless prevention and rapid re-housing services is a key intervention in communities that have had success with homelessness. This means reaching out to veterans who either have recently lost their housing or are in danger of doing so; working with landlords and family members to resolve conflicts; working to give the veteran access to employment, benefits, health care, and other needed income and services; and providing short term cash assistance to pay a security deposit, catch up on unpaid rent, etc. In the Senate, the Zero Tolerance for Veterans Homelessness Act would authorize such a program.

Support results-oriented VA homelessness programs. Existing VA homelessness programs such as the Homeless Grants and Per Diem Program, providing temporary housing and treatment for veterans for whom an abstinence model is appropriate, are in the process of being expanded through the appropriations process. These programs also require policy adjustments to allow better cooperation with other federal housing programs, more flexibility, and a greater focus on outcomes and appropriate targeting.

Conclusion

I am not happy to report that our nation now has some 20 years of experience on the issue of homeless veterans. We know that while some veterans become homeless immediately after discharge, for many more their difficulties take years to emerge. We know that post-traumatic stress disorder, traumatic brain injuries and other factors of war may

make them vulnerable to increasing poverty and housing problems. And we know that housing and supportive housing are a solution to these problems.

Tens of thousands of veterans will be returning from Iraq and Afghanistan. While some have already experienced homelessness, the numbers are not large. Experience from the Vietnam era, however, teaches that there is a possibility of delayed impact of combat service on homelessness, especially when veterans are returning to high unemployment. If we do not take advantage of all that we have learned about solutions to homelessness, in the future we can expect to see thousands more veterans on our streets and in our shelters.

We have a tremendous opportunity before us. There is unprecedented public will that we not make the same mistakes with the veterans of the current conflicts as we did with veterans from the Vietnam era and after, and that we do whatever is necessary to prevent these veterans being consigned to the streets. That same public will gives us an opportunity as well to rectify those previous mistakes, and house veterans who have lived in the street for years. Now is the time to be bold. We can prevent veterans from becoming homeless. We can house those veterans who are already homeless. And we can ensure that all veterans, including those with low incomes, have stable, decent and affordable housing. This is our vital mission.

Thank you for inviting us to testify before you today on this critical issue.