

Let me start by thanking Sen. Isakson for the opportunity to address the committee today. As a service provider, CEO and as a Vietnam Veteran, I am grateful for the SSVF funding that allows HOPE Atlanta to help my fellow veterans in ways we could otherwise not afford. Because Georgia has the 5th highest percentage of unsheltered homeless veterans in the country, these funds are incredibly helpful to those of us working with the VA to get our former warriors stably housed.

There are 4 social service agencies in the Metro Atlanta area currently receiving SSVF funds. Of these providers, HOPE Atlanta receives the most funding, covers the largest geographic area and services the most homeless veterans. Since the SSVF program began, we have learned a lot and had some great successes, but challenges remain.

I'll start by telling you about the challenges, some of which could be fixed with more funding while others are more complicated and time consuming to fix even with more funding.

First, the numbers are large and the solutions are individual and often complicated. As we implement the program, HOPE Atlanta faces the following regional challenges:

- A lack of affordable housing

- A lack of adequate public transportation

- A lack of appropriate employment opportunities that pay a living wage

For the chronically homeless segment of the veteran's population there are the added challenges of PTSD and other mental health and/or addiction issues.

Second, according to a report in US News, in 2014 there were 21.8 million veterans in the US. By HUD's own estimates, almost 50,000 at any one time are homeless in our nation. HUD estimates that another 1.4 million veterans and their families are considered at risk of homelessness. No SSVF program, including HOPE Atlanta's, has the resources to address this potential volume of sustained and long term demand for our services without the continued and increased commitment by this and future administrations in support of veterans and their families.

Finally, in order to help the VA reach their functional zero goal by the end of this year, HOPE should add an employment specialist. We can't change the lack of employment opportunities that pay a living wage, but an employment specialist would help us find some of the jobs there are and connect the veterans to them. We also need to add an employee who is trained through the SSI/SSDI Outreach, Access and Recover Program (SOAR) to work specifically with our disabled veterans. SOAR trained benefits specialists have a far higher success rate than those without this training (65% versus 27%). They also have a significantly faster decision rate than non-SOAR trained staff do. We can't change the lack of affordable housing but a dedicated SOAR specialist could help us get more stable SSI/SSDI benefits for our veterans which would help keep them stably housed.

Currently there is no funding for these positions and with more than 2000 unduplicated calls each year from veterans requesting HOPE's help through the SSVF Program, there is no way to meet their needs as current funding stands.

So much for the challenges. Let's move on to our SSVF Program successes! One third of HOPE Atlanta's SSVF team are veterans. They have been great assets and have contributed to our success enormously. Also contributing to our success:

- The VA regional meetings and national conference calls to facilitate training and exchanges for what's working for all the SSCF providers that resulted in greater flexibility in providing program services.
- The VA's Community Resource and Referral center at Fort McPherson (CRRC) which provides a one stop shop for veterans. Having staff there 5 days a week has been very helpful to our success.

Some specific successes include the following:

- Since October 2012 through July 13, 2015, 80% of the veterans in our SSVF program exited into permanent housing.
- HOPE Atlanta's PATH Outreach team, the most successful PATH team in the Metro region, has reached, engaged and built relationships with chronically homeless veterans on the streets and under the bridges and connected them to housing, medical and mental health services.

- Besides our three full time staff at the CRRC located at Fort McPherson, HOPE Atlanta has established and staffed 6 other sites to provide SSVF services to veterans in 15 counties across our region. These have contributed greatly to our success.

I've now regaled you with the challenges and successes of HOPE Atlanta's SSVF program. What I've focused on has necessarily been a broad overview. But SSVF is a program for veterans, and veterans are, of course, individuals. So let's talk for a moment about a particular veteran and his family who are in a far different place today than they were when we first met them. This is the sort of story that keeps those of us at HOPE Atlanta going, day in and day out, working with difficult clients in difficult situations and wondering if all our hard work really matters, wondering how much longer we can keep on slogging away in these particular trenches... and then getting up the next day to do it all over again.

Joe is a Vietnam era veteran in his mid-fifties. He was injured after serving for three years in the Army and received a medical discharge. After leaving the Army, he married, raised a family and worked many different jobs, never letting the loss of one job keep him from finding another, until he was laid off in 2014 and simply couldn't find another one. With no income, he and his wife and the granddaughter they were raising, lost their home. The three of them lived in their car while Joe continued to seek employment. Because of his veteran status, the Department of Labor referred him to HOPE Atlanta and things finally began to turn around. We found an apartment for the family and provided 5 months of rental assistance while he continued to look for work every day. He never gave up, never lost hope while submitting more than 300 applications for work. This sort of rejection takes a toll on a man, but Joe persevered, with his HOPE Atlanta case manager at his side, until finally — FINALLY! — he was offered a great job with a gas company. He's now proudly supporting his family on his own.

It's stories such as Joe's that keep us in the trenches, helping as many as veterans as we can. It's SSVF funding that supports this important work. Thank you for continuing to support this program and the US veterans who need us.