

**STATEMENT OF
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**SUBMITTED TO THE
Committee on Veterans' Affairs
U.S. Senate
Hearing on Ending Veteran Homelessness**

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Chairman Isakson, Ranking Member Blumenthal, and Members of the Committee, as executive director of a community-based nonprofit organization that partners with the Department of Veterans Affairs, I thank you for inviting me to present our perspective on progress toward VA's goal of ending veteran homelessness by the end of 2015.

Founded in 1991 by a grassroots coalition of businesses, congregations and concerned community members, Friendship Place is a leader in Washington, D.C., in developing and implementing innovative solutions to homelessness that have demonstrable results and a lasting impact. Our customized, person-focused programs include street outreach, drop-in, free medical and psychiatric services, job placement, case management, transitional shelter, rapid rehousing, homelessness prevention, permanent supportive housing for families and individuals, specialized services for homeless youth and young adults, and rapid rehousing and homelessness prevention for veterans and their families. In 2014, we helped 2,000 people; in 2015, we will help more than 2,500.

In October 2014, The Community Partnership for the Prevention of Homelessness (the agency responsible for coordinating DC's homeless services Continuum of Care) presented its 25th Anniversary Award "for extraordinary service to homeless single adults" to Friendship Place.

We accomplish our mission – to empower individuals and families experiencing or at risk of homelessness to rebuild their lives with the involvement of the community – with the help of more than 300 volunteers, who contribute 20,000 hours of service a year, and the support of 26 neighboring congregations, several of which partner with us to provide shelter or housing.

Friendship Place has participated in the DC VA Medical Center's annual January Stand Down, Winterhaven, since 2010. Since October 2011, we have been providing homelessness prevention and rapid rehousing services under VA's Supportive Services for Veteran Families program (SSVF). With our \$2 million SSVF contract this year, we are serving veteran households in the District of Columbia and eight surrounding counties in Maryland and Virginia. In April 2015, we received an additional \$3 million dollar SSVF surge grant to be used over the next three years for households in DC alone.

We call our SSVF program "Veterans First." Based on the successful outcomes of Veterans First, VA has twice awarded Mentor Status to Friendship Place – in 2014 and 2015. In addition, within our grant, VA is funding a staff position dedicated to providing training and technical assistance to providers in our SSVF region.

In June 2014, Friendship Place launched Families First, a pilot project for veteran families in Prince George's County, Maryland, who need more support than SSVF can provide. With funding from the Maryland Department of Housing and Community Development and the Freddie Mac Foundation, Families First will serve 40 to 45 veteran families over three years. The goal of the program is to end both homelessness and poverty for the participating families. Case management places a special focus on increasing income through education, job placement, and benefits. Eligible families must have at least one dependent child and be below 50 percent of the Area Median Income. They are provided intensive case management for six months with possible re-certification for up to three years.

The Director of our Veterans Services Division and I are both members of the 25 Cities – a joint initiative of VA, the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), the U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness (USICH), Community Solutions, and the Rapid Results Institute – whose aim is to achieve VA's goal of ending veteran homelessness nationwide by the end of 2015 through implementing Coordinated Entry. Friendship Place has assumed a leadership role in implementing Coordinated Entry for DC through Veterans NOW, the 25 Cities Initiative, and Zero:2016.

Based on our five years of experience working closely with both the DC VA Medical Center and VA's National Center on Homelessness among Veterans, we would like to present our perspective in four areas concerning Federal efforts to end veteran homelessness: (1) the SSVF program, (2) the joint VA-Department of Housing and Urban Development Supportive Housing Program (HUD-VASH), (3) character-of-discharge issues, and (4) VA's Homeless Providers Grant and Per Diem Program.

1) SSVF

In the most recently completed fiscal year (2014) of our provision of SSVF services in DC and eight surrounding counties in Maryland and Virginia:

- Our Veterans First program served 415 veteran households – 89 percent of them with Extremely Low household incomes (less than 30 percent of the Area Median Income)
- We exited 267 households, representing 461 individuals (including 147 children).
- 425 of the 461 individuals who exited the program in FY 2014 (92 percent) graduated to stable permanent housing.
- The average length of time from intake to exit was just under three months (88 days) for homelessness prevention and just over three months (104 days) for rapid rehousing.

In other words, 425 people who would have remained or become homeless but for our intervention are now safely housed and rebuilding their lives. The average cost per household served is less than \$5,000 – a small price to pay for stability for an entire household.

With the additional surge funding, we now have the capacity to serve 550 households a year.

We know that the program is effective. The annual Point-in-Time enumeration reveals that the overall number of homeless individuals dropped by 2 percent in the Metro area from 2011 to 2015, while the number of homeless veterans dropped by 19 percent.

We would like to draw your attention to key features of the SSVF program that, from our perspective as a community provider, make it successful:

- It is based on nationally recognized best practices, including the Housing First service model.
- It is empowering. In the words of one of our Veterans First graduates, the program is a “hand up,” not a “hand out.” The service model recognizes that the individual or family is resilient and can rebuild quickly with the right kind of help.
- It is individualized and participant-centered. SSVF does not dictate that we deliver services in a cookie-cutter manner but gives us flexibility to provide exactly what each particular household needs – no more and no less – to transition rapidly into stable housing.
- Clinically, the program is backed by CARF, the national gold standard for rehabilitation services.

- SSVF is flexible, allowing us as the service provider to adapt services to the local community and allowing veterans to transfer agencies and even regions.
- As a community-based organization, we can leverage additional resources – volunteer support, private donations, and in-kind contributions – to enhance the assistance we are able to provide.

More than anything, the success of the SSVF program is due to the outstanding expertise of the national VA leadership and their unfailing commitment to working collaboratively with their local grantees, including Friendship Place, to continually refine and improve the service model so as to ensure that we are achieving the desired results as effectively and efficiently as possible. We would like, in particular, to recognize the contributions of Mr. Vincent Kane, former Director of the National Center on Homelessness among Veterans (now Special Assistant to VA Secretary Robert McDonald); Mr. John Kuhn, National Director of VA Homeless Prevention Services; Mr. Dennis Culhane, Director of Research; and Ms. Adrienne Melendez, who is the Regional Coordinator for SSVF for our region.

We applaud this VA team for providing excellent training (monthly webinars, regional meetings, SSVF universities), for fostering collaborative relationships among SSVF providers (coordinating regional meetings in which we can share our best practices), and for soliciting and being responsive to our feedback.

We regret that there have recently been travel restrictions placed on the SSVF regional coordinators. We believe that SSVF providers need the hands-on technical support of their regional coordinators if communities nationwide are to reach the goal of functional zero by the end of this year. We strongly urge the immediate lifting of these travel restrictions.

Here in DC, we have moved quickly to establish and fully implement a system of Coordinated Entry, which has increased the effective utilization of resources by reserving HUD VASH for the most vulnerable veterans while assigning to SSVF those who need only temporary help to become stably housed.

2) HUD-VASH

The success of SSVF provides ample evidence that VA can make effective use of community-based organizations to get results in its efforts to end veteran homelessness. To improve outcomes in the HUD VASH program, we recommend that VA (1) increase the use of community organizations for the provision of the program's case management services, and (2) streamline the process for awarding contracts to community organizations.

The advantages of contracting out case management services for HUD VASH are many:

- Community providers can have smaller caseloads and, therefore, more intensive case management. In Housing First programs, the larger the caseload, the less likely it is that those served will achieve long-term housing stability; smaller caseloads produce higher housing retention rates. Programs with low retention rates are more costly to the taxpayer in the long run, because participants who return to the streets then seek out other services elsewhere.
- Community providers have maximum flexibility to provide culturally competent services adapted to local needs and conditions.
- Successfully linking program participants to community resources is key to the success of any Housing First program, and community providers are more familiar with and connected to resources in the local community.
- Separating the funding source and the service provider allows for better checks and balances; the funding source can more objectively evaluate programs that are run by an outside provider.
- Unfortunately, some veterans are uncomfortable seeking services at VA because of negative experiences they may have had in the past.

Friendship Place has been providing Housing First services under a contract with the DC Department of Human Services since 2008, with an annual housing retention rate that consistently tops 98 percent. Our Housing First Director and I would be happy to meet with any interested Congressional or VA staff to provide greater detail on what makes our Housing First program successful and how a community-based model could be implemented by VA for HUD VASH.

3) Character-of-Discharge Issues

Friendship Place urges passage of the “Homeless Veterans Services Protection Act of 2015” (S. 1731), which will guarantee that homeless veterans with Other Than Honorable discharges have access to all VA services for homeless veterans, including GPD and SSVF (excluding veterans who received dishonorable discharges or were discharged following court-martial).

Veterans with other than honorable discharges make up 15 percent of the nation’s homeless veteran population and are among the most vulnerable of all the veterans that seek the help of our SSVF program. Eddie is a typical example; he was nearing completion of his enlistment with a record of exemplary service when his squad was attacked in Afghanistan and

he was one of only a few survivors. He began self-medicating his PTSD, and ended up being discharged under other-than-honorable conditions.

If SSVF eligibility were limited to only those veterans that are eligible for VA health care, veterans like Eddie would be left out in the cold. Fortunately, we were able to get him legal assistance and walk him through the process of upgrading his discharge status, so that he is now VHA-eligible and can receive the help he needs and deserves.

As we reach the end of the Five-Year Plan to End Veteran Homelessness, it is increasingly important that we retain the ability to serve homeless veterans with Other Than Honorable discharges.

4) GPD

We believe that VA's Grant and Per Diem program would be more effective with greater flexibility in its regulations and with implementation of the following changes:

- The VA should address structural issues in GPD in order to move veterans through the program and into stable permanent housing more quickly. The current slow pace of rotations through GPD is a costly waste of VA resources for addressing homelessness.
- To ensure the provision of high-quality services that are in line with best practices, VA should establish the same high level of technical support for GPD providers that SSVF providers enjoy.

Summary

We are excited and energized by VA's impressive progress toward ending veteran homelessness and are honored to partner in this admirable – and much-needed – work.

We believe that the following recommendations, if implemented, could expedite the success of VA's efforts:

1. Extend the authorization of appropriations for the highly successful SSVF program and lift travel restrictions on the SSVF's regional coordinators.
2. Increase the contracting out of HUD VASH case management services to community providers and streamline the process for awarding HUD VASH contracts.

3. Ensure that homeless veterans with Other Than Honorable discharges are eligible for VA's homeless services by passing the "Homeless Veterans Services Protection Act of 2015" (S. 1731).
4. Institute changes in GPD that will result in a more timely rotation of veterans through the program.

These recommendations not only are aligned with best practices in the field of homeless services, but would, we believe, make VA's entire system of services for homeless and at-risk veterans and their families both more cost-effective and more humane.

Thank you for the opportunity to participate in this important discussion.