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Testimony of the

National Coalition
for Homeless Veterans

Before the

United States Senate
Committee on Veterans Affairs

Ending Veterans' Homelessness

March 24, 2010

Chairman Senator Akaka, Ranking Member Senator Burr,
and Distinguished Members of the Committee:

The National Coalition for Homeless Veterans (NCHV) is honored to appear before this committee today to comment on ending veterans' homelessness.

For 20 years, NCHV has worked diligently to serve as the nation's primary liaison between the community- and faith-based organizations that help homeless veterans, the Congress, and the federal agencies that are invested in the campaign to end veteran homelessness in the United States. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) officials have testified before the Congress that this partnership, despite considerable financial pressures due to war and economic uncertainty, is largely responsible for the phenomenal reduction in the number of homeless veterans on the streets of America each night – from about 250,000 in FY 2004 to 107,000 today, according to the annual VA Community Homelessness Assessment, Local Education and Networking Groups (CHALENG) Reports.

Through the efforts of VA and the U.S. Department of Labor, some of the most innovative and successful grant programs in the federal arsenal have jointly nourished a nationwide, community-based homeless veteran assistance network that provides transitional housing and services support for more than 100,000 veterans each year. The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development has become the third critical partner in this campaign through the HUD-VA Supportive Housing Program (HUD-VASH) for veterans with serious mental illness and other disabilities, and by incentivizing the inclusion of homeless and extreme low-income veterans in local Continuum of Care funding applications.

The success of these federal agencies and the community- and faith-based service partners NCHV represents over the last five years offers proof that the campaign to end veteran

homelessness can be won. The President has established this as a priority of his Administration; and VA Secretary Eric Shinseki is mobilizing his Department to strengthen its intervention programs and expand its support of local prevention strategies through his Five-Year Plan to End Homelessness Among Veterans. This plan will strengthen the services offered to veterans and their families in an unprecedented fashion by effectively engaging community partners and supports for all those who are in need of assistance.

On November 3-5, 2009, the Department of Veterans Affairs hosted a three-day summit focused on ending veterans' homelessness. During this historic event, Secretary Eric Shinseki boldly stated that "My name is Shinseki, and I am here to end veteran homelessness." This declaration shows the level of commitment and dedication to the serious problem of veteran homelessness. The most noticeable recurring theme throughout the three-day program was the need to strengthen VA's partnership with other federal agencies and the community- and faith-based service providers that have helped reduce veteran homelessness by more than 50 percent in the last five years. With more than 3,500 points of access to assistance available to veterans today that did not exist 35 years ago, VA can continue to serve those veterans who are homeless. Our understanding of the VA's plan to end homelessness in five years is based on a presentation of the "basic framework" of the plan made by Mr. Peter Dougherty, Director of the VA Homeless Programs Office, and Mr. Paul Smits, Associate Chief Consultant for Homeless and Residential Rehabilitation and Treatment Services for the Veterans Health Administration, on the final day of the summit.

The plan will have six "strategic pillars." Included among those are four that have been in development for more than two decades – outreach, treatment, employment and benefits, and community partnerships – and two that represent new areas of engagement – prevention, and housing and supportive services for low-income veterans.

NCHV feels that these pillars are good starting points, but it is vital that VA knows the key to successfully ending homelessness among veterans in five years is through the relationships and connections of each community. Before offering our suggestions on what else VA and the Federal Government should be doing, we believe it's important to reflect for a moment on the history of the homeless veteran assistance movement NCHV represents, because it speaks volumes about why we are assembled in this room ... and the reasonableness of VA Secretary Shinseki's ambitious vision of ending veteran homelessness in five years.

In the past nine years VA has quadrupled its investment in the Homeless Providers Grant and Per Diem Program from slightly more than 120 programs to nearly 500 across the country.

The Homeless Veterans' Reintegration Program has more than tripled in capacity to serve homeless veterans and has become one of the most successful employment assistance programs in the Department of Labor portfolio.

Under technical assistance grants and cooperative agreements with both those agencies, NCHV has provided program guidance, access to resources, and vital communications to more than 2,100 community- and faith-based service providers from Seattle to Puerto Rico, from Maine to the island of Guam.

Health Care for Homeless Veterans coordinators, women veteran coordinators, and OEF/OIF specialists have been placed at virtually every VA medical center and most VA Regional Benefits Offices.

HUD and VA have allocated 20,000 HUD-VASH vouchers to veterans with serious mental and physical disabilities, with another 10,000 expected to become available next year.

Five years ago, the VA CHALENG report estimated as many as 250,000 veterans slept on the streets of America each night. Today, that number stands at 107,000 – more than a 50% reduction despite the fact the number of contact points in the CHALENG process has more than tripled during that time.

We offer the following additional thoughts on what NCHV sees as necessary steps to enable the Federal Government to end homelessness among veterans in five years:

1. VA needs to clearly identify gaps in the availability of transitional and permanent housing in communities with homeless veterans and make it a priority to build capacity in those communities using existing authorities. New York, Boston, Chicago, and Los Angeles have large gaps between the demand for transitional housing and the number of facilities available. Although the numbers are smaller, there are equally compelling gaps in many small and medium-sized communities and on Indian tribal lands. VA and its community-based partners cannot address these gaps without an immediate legislative change to the Grant and Per Diem Program.
2. VA needs to examine outreach, referral and admission policies at every VA medical center to ensure that these policies are collaborative and consistent with the goal of ending homelessness. This means a significant increase in the Office of VA Homeless Programs oversight capability.
3. VA needs to revise its program rules so that veterans who are seeking admission to a domiciliary or grant and per diem program are immediately admitted even if eligibility has not yet been determined. If a veteran is seeking to enter a program on a Friday evening, VA rules should authorize admission and reimbursement, even if it later turns out the veteran is ineligible for VA support.
4. VA should convene an open meeting with community-based organizations serving homeless veterans no later than the end of May 2010 to discuss ideas about how VA could immediately alter program rules and policies to permit greater flexibility in the use of grant funds.
5. The Federal Government needs to take immediate steps to stimulate the creation of additional permanent housing for homeless veterans, including project basing for Section 8 rental housing vouchers.
6. VA and HUD should adopt a plan so that eligible veterans who qualify for Section 8 rental housing vouchers are housed in 30 days or less. More vouchers without an assurance that they can be used is not going to solve the housing problem.
7. Congress and VA, working with the Office of Management and Budget, should agree on an immediate action plan to eliminate internal and external roadblocks and procedural delays in the award of enhanced-use leases to groups seeking to house homeless veterans. The current process takes too long and national objectives such as ending homelessness are often met with resistance by local opposition.
8. The Federal Government needs to work intensively to eliminate seams and build bridges between the various programs that provide funds to serve homeless veterans. This will require the active collaboration of a number of Department Secretaries who share Secretary Shinseki's

and the President's desire to address this issue in an urgent manner.

9. VA needs to refocus its homeless program performance measures on increasing the overall number of veterans who are served by these programs, not just how many vouchers have been distributed this year. Congress can assist this change by demanding more timely and comprehensive program performance information.

10. It is clear from published research that early intervention can dramatically reduce the effects of traumatic stress and subsequent PTSD. As noted earlier in our testimony, mental illness is a significant contributor to veteran homelessness. This Committee should regularly monitor the Department of Defense's ability to provide mental health services by military health personnel to service members who have experienced traumatic stress. Although Admiral Mullen and others have acknowledged the need to heal soldiers and Marines who have experienced such stress, it would be very useful to compare the Defense Department's capacity to respond to service members in a timely fashion with that of the Department of Veterans Affairs,

NCHV has on several occasions acknowledged the leadership role of the Committee in this noble campaign. We know it is your leadership that brings us to this moment in history – Never before have we, as a nation at war, been better prepared to ensure that those who sacrifice some measure of their lives to serve in the military have the support they need to enjoy the peace and prosperity they have helped protect and preserve. The Homeless Veterans and Other Health Care Authorities Act of 2010 lays the foundation on which we as a nation can wage a successful assault on veteran homelessness and fulfill the Secretary's Five-Year Plan.
Homeless Veterans and Other Health Care Authorities Act of 2010

For several years the homeless veteran assistance movement NCHV represents has realized there can be no end to veteran homelessness until we, as a nation, develop a strategy to address the needs of our former guardians before they become homeless – victims of health and economic misfortunes they cannot overcome without assistance.

The causes of all homelessness can be grouped into three primary categories: health issues; economic issues; and lack of access to safe, affordable housing for low and extreme-low income families in most American communities. This has been a chronic problem since the birth of the Great Society during the Johnson administration.

The additional stressors veterans experience are prolonged separation from family and social support networks while engaging in extremely stressful training and occupational assignments; war-related illnesses and disabilities – both mental and physical; and the difficulty of many to transfer military occupational skills into the civilian workforce.

NCHV believes the Homeless Veterans and Other Health Care Authorities Act of 2010, introduced by Senator Patty Murray – and unanimously supported by this Committee – has the potential to set this nation on course to finally achieve victory in the campaign to end veteran homelessness in the United States.

Victory in this campaign requires success on two fronts: effective, economical intervention strategies that help men and women rise above adversity to regain control of their lives; and prevention strategies that empower communities to support our wounded warriors and their families before they lose their ability to cope with stressors beyond their control.

We believe the Homeless Veterans and Other Health Care Authorities Act addresses needs on both fronts.

- As written, the Act calls for the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to study the method of reimbursing GPD community providers for their program expenses and report to Congress, within one year, his recommendations for revising the payment system. VA estimated that the current per diem payment of \$34.40 covers no more than 20-30% of the cost of services provided by grant recipients. Because the current formula provides such a low level of financial support, there is inadequate VA presence in many large cities where tens of thousands of homeless veterans live. Rural homelessness is more difficult to track, but it's easy to see that few VA-supported programs exist in rural locations. The best way to address this gap would be to authorize the Secretary to provide grant assistance to all eligible organizations on a program cost basis rather than a per diem basis, and authorize the Secretary to provide differing levels of support to programs in high cost areas and in areas where there are significant gaps in services for veterans.

This new authority could be time-limited if the Congress wanted to more closely examine the effect of such a change. To tell VA it needs to take a year to prepare a report, which would then be considered for up to two years by the next Congress, is to guarantee little progress in many parts of the country where VA-supported programs are sorely lacking. NCHV has been advocating this change since 2006. The Act calls for an increase in the annual GPD authorization to \$200 million, beginning in FY 2010, which could provide additional funds for outreach through community-based veteran service centers and mobile service vans for rural areas, while continuing to increase the bed capacity of VA's community-based partners. These outreach initiatives will likely play a pivotal role as the VA's veteran homelessness prevention strategy moves forward.

- Instructs the Secretary to establish a program to prevent veteran homelessness. The Act provides authorization for up to \$50 million annually to provide supportive services for low-income veterans to reduce their risks of becoming homeless, and to help those who are homeless find housing. Provisions include short- to medium-term rental assistance, poor credit history repair, housing search and relocation assistance, and help with security and utilities deposits. For many of the nation's 630,000 veterans living in extreme poverty (at or below 50% of the federal poverty level), this aid could mean the difference between achieving stability and continuing on the downward spiral into homelessness.

- Develops the Homeless Veterans Management Information System. This system would collect the essential information needed to determine how many veterans requested and received housing assistance and for what length of time the assistance was given. This information will play a vital role in developing housing and services in future years.

- Provides for the expansion of HUD-VASH to a total of 60,000 housing vouchers for veterans with serious mental and emotional illnesses, other disabilities, and extreme low-income veteran families that will need additional services to remain housed. According to an analysis of data by the National Alliance to End Homelessness, about 63,000 veterans can be classified as chronically homeless. This Act would, therefore, effectively end chronic veteran homelessness within the next five years.

- Establishes within HUD a Special Assistant for Veterans Affairs to ensure veterans have access to housing and homeless assistance programs funded by the Department.
- Modernizes the extremely important and successful VA Grant and Per Diem Program (GPD) to allow for the utilization of innovative project funding strategies – including the use of matching funds from other private or public sources to facilitate and hasten project development.
- Requires the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to submit a comprehensive plan to end veterans' homelessness. Not only would this plan list the current programs offered to assist homeless veterans, it would also lay the groundwork for evaluating the effectiveness of those programs.
- Creates a program, authorized at \$10 million through FY 2014, to provide employment assistance and child care to women veterans and veterans with dependent children. This would allow the growing number of women veterans to have access to employment and training opportunities that they are currently lacking.
- Expands the Grant and Per Diem Program by including male homeless veterans with minor dependents as a new category. Community-based organizations continue to see the number of male veterans with dependent children growing; by expanding the GPD to serve this population directly, many more veterans and their families could be assisted.

In Summation,

As we move forward on this effort to end veterans homelessness, I want to thank you for your support helping those men and women who have served this country in their time of greatest need. The progress we made has been commendable but our work will not be done until there are no veterans left on the streets.

The Homeless Veterans and Other Health Care Authorities Act of 2010 lays the foundation of the work that lies ahead. From the increase in the number of HUD-VASH vouchers, and the ability to provide supportive services for low-income and women veterans, to the improvement and expansion of the GPD program and reimbursement process, this bill provide real opportunities to move the PLAN into ACTION and fulfill the historic mission to end homelessness among America's former guardians in five years.