



Testimony of the

NATIONAL COALITION
for **HOMELESS VETERANS**

United States Senate & House of Representatives
Committees on Veterans' Affairs

"Legislative Presentation of The National Coalition for
Homeless Veterans"

March 2, 2022

Chairs Tester & Takano, Ranking Members Moran & Bost, and distinguished Members of the Committees on Veterans' Affairs:

On behalf of our Board of Directors and Members across the country, thank you for the opportunity to share the views of the National Coalition for Homeless Veterans (NCHV) with you. NCHV is the resource and technical assistance center for a national network of community-based service providers and local, state and federal agencies that provide emergency, transitional, and supportive housing, food, health services, job training and placement assistance, legal aid and case management support for thousands of homeless, at-risk, and formerly homeless veterans each year.

We are committed to working with our network and partners across the country to end homelessness among veterans. We thank you for your leadership and continuing efforts to focus on the needs of veterans experiencing or at-risk of homelessness, as Congress put forth COVID relief legislation in the *Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act* or CARES Act, P.L. 116-136 and in Public Law 116-315, the *Johnny Isakson and David P. Roe, M.D. Veterans Health Care and Benefits Improvement Act of 2020 (Isakson/Roe)*. The assistance Congress provided has resulted in over \$1.456 billion in new resources being distributed to organizations across the country to keep veterans safe from COVID by decongesting shelter spaces, ramping up rapid rehousing capacity, and focusing on individualized housing options in hotels and motels.

While HUD has recently released 2021 Point-in-Time Count data that showed a drop of 10% in the sheltered veteran population, that data is not inclusive of the entire system of care for veterans. Despite these gaps, NCHV remains cautiously optimistic. We know preceding the pandemic veteran homelessness decreased by 50% between 2010 and 2019. Homelessness was once again prioritized last year at the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). It has become clear that we are making progress again and that we must maintain and enhance efforts to end homelessness. We can do this while simultaneously recalibrating them to respond to the urgent economic crisis COVID has created and the inequities that certain veteran groups continue to face.

The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted veterans in unprecedented ways, including by increasing housing and financial instability. VA has notified grantees that the Department of Health and Human Services' public health emergency could be lifted as early as this upcoming April with numbers of veterans still on the verge of homelessness. With many provisions in the *Isakson/Roe* bill tied to a declared state of emergency, NCHV has identified some program adaptations that should be kept as best practices. Some enhancements can be retained at very minimal expense, for example, extending the *Section 4201* spending flexibility for Supportive Service for Veterans and Families (SSVF) grantees would be essential. The ability to rapidly rehouse veterans into active hotels and motels to enable VA time to place a veteran in more permanent housing has become a model to be continued. VA should also allow service providers to continue to decongregate essential transitional housing capacity via capital grants.

Congress and the Centers for Disease Control recognized that homelessness makes both veterans, and the general population at large, more vulnerable to exposure to and transmission of highly communicable conditions like COVID-19. And as the largest health care system in the country, VA has been in a unique position leading the way for the country in testing, treatment access, and outcomes. The impending end of the pandemic designation is causing uncertainty among organizations serving veterans. We must take that into consideration as we move forward to ensure veterans can access a system of care that adapts to their needs in a post-COVID world.

During the emergency, providers of transitional housing were finally able to request reimbursement from VA for closer to the actual cost of sheltering a veteran. At the sunset of the declared emergency, this rate will be cut by over 60 percent. Many entities that are currently providing services for veterans will be unable to continue doing so. Service providers for programs like VA's Grant and Per Diem Program must justify all expenses and submit them to VA for approval at the end of the program year to even receive program funds. This is not a request for an across-the-board rate increase, as VA only ever pays for veterans actively receiving services. Congress would be letting service providers have the option of trying to justify the full cost of sheltering a veteran. This issue is taken up as a provision in Chairman Tester's bill, S. 2172.

The National Coalition for Homeless Veterans (NCHV), and over 60 organizations urge you to support one bill in particular, S. 2172, the *Building Solutions for Veterans Experiencing Homelessness Act of 2021*. The bill would preserve and enhance direly needed COVID-19-related program improvements from both CARES and Isakson/Roe. Without a legislative fix, additional VA grantees will be forced to make the tough financial decision others have related to prioritizing COVID safety measures at a financial loss, returning to pre-COVID program occupancy levels, or discontinuing essential shelter and treatment program operations altogether. The bill would reduce the regulatory burden on funding for renovation of shelter for all veterans experiencing homelessness and provide organizations nationwide with the funding and flexibility to provide adequate services to unhoused veterans. Every veteran deserves access to safe shelter and housing, whether they are currently experiencing homelessness or are facing housing-cost burdens that put them at risk of homelessness.

We have a renewed opportunity to continue reducing veteran homelessness nationwide, even with the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. There are other provisions in S. 2172 that are critical to our ability to address veteran homelessness. The bill would allow the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to provide adequate training and technical assistance for its homeless programs and enhance veterans' access to case management services to connect them with the benefits and resources they earned. It would also recognize the impact of the Homeless Veterans' Reintegration Program (HVRP) in connecting veterans with long-term, meaningful jobs. Reporting has shown there is tangible value added by HVRP in increasing the effectiveness, efficiency, and veteran outcomes of partnered programs.

Aging and Rural Veterans

Aging veterans and rural veteran populations have become an important intersection in the discussion of improving services, access and information dissemination for some of the most remote and inaccessible veterans. We must look at how programs communicate and interact with each other. NCHV recommends authorizing HUD-VASH with a grant making capability, where homeless service providers can provide enhanced aftercare services where elderly individuals may be on a wait list between programs, or to waiting to utilize a voucher, and providers would be able to accommodate these higher acuity aging veterans with access to funds for the necessary medical staff. With the passage of P.L. 116-315, VA has new authority to improve services across the board by providing communication, transportation as well as safety and survival necessities.

COVID-19 Crisis & Recovery

Presented with a good number of issues at the pandemic's outset, VA and its grantees have risen to the challenges to date. VA must continue to address veteran homelessness within the greater scale of the COVID-19 response, timely disseminating funding to grantees. VA must also get out timely information to community partners, especially regarding expansions of eligibility with extremely hard to contact populations. Approximately 15 percent of the veterans experiencing homelessness have other-than-honorable discharges, and in some urban communities that percentage rises as high as 30 percent. We acknowledge the intricacies of the intertwined health care systems, yet a year has passed, and every month without official guidance is another month an eligible veteran is deprived the benefit of a roof over their head.

We encourage collaborative Federal efforts to identify ways to efficiently serve veterans experiencing homelessness. As our country moves out of a crisis response phase and into a COVID recovery phase, we have the opportunity to focus on permanent housing as communities wind down COVID hotel and motel operations. One way to do that would be to appropriate case management funding to VA to fully utilize HUD-VASH vouchers for which funds have already been appropriated to HUD. Some communities are purchasing hotels and motels for conversion. Funding to renovate them, paired with project-based vouchers for operating funds could be a mechanism to increase the availability of affordable housing more rapidly than traditional affordable housing development timelines allow. There is absolutely no reason any veterans in motel/hotel placements temporarily should be exited back into homelessness at the end of the pandemic.

NCHV anticipates the economic recovery will take time, and payments made for rent in arrears could move veterans off assistance before they have stabilized. Re-Employment and re-integration efforts will be crucial to stabilize an anticipated influx of unemployed veterans through an expanded Homeless Veteran Reintegration Program through 2023. There will be a deepening economic crisis when unemployment benefits sunset. Similarly, sunset of the eviction and moratoria leaves veterans without a critical layer of protection against housing instability. Nearly 15 million Americans have accrued over \$50 billion in missed rental payments. They will immediately be added to the "at-risk" category of homelessness if unable to access emergency rent assistance or other homelessness prevention funding.

Funding Recommendations for Fiscal Year 23'

NCHV recommendations are for appropriations in addition to program authorizations necessary for homeless veteran programs to function for the remaining balance of FY'22 and for FY'23 and considering passed and proposed program needs. NCHV estimates a total need in excess of \$884 million, including \$50 million for DOL's HVRP program and \$100 million for HUD to provide new HUD-VASH voucher utilization capabilities to expand access to permanent housing in a recovery.

Calculations are made based upon current VA program spending rates in the first two years of this concerted effort and the ability of departments to spend current funds through 2023. From the outset of the pandemic and initial shutdowns in March of 2020, over the course of two years Congress has appropriated an additional \$1.456 billion for VA's Homeless Program's office. Considering that VA spent over a billion dollars over the past year on rapidly rehousing veterans alone, as a bipartisan effort of the Country, NCHV recommends continued support at current funding levels to ensure that sufficient support for housing unstable veterans is available, even as other Federal, State, and Local pandemic-related supports for the general population are expended.

VA

- a. **Health Care for Homeless Veterans Program (HCHV) - \$50 million increase and reauthorization** for temporary housing for homeless vets to reduce social distancing and to increase PPE availability for VA staff, outreach, and surveillance of homeless encampments during the crisis and recovery period. The program currently does not serve veterans with an "other than honorable" discharge status. Due to the importance of this program, we request that Congress expand its eligibility criteria to include veterans with OTH discharges, and Guard and Reserve members who may not have been federally-activated.
- b. **Supportive Services for Veteran Families (SSVF) \$400 million increase and reauthorization** to provide flexible assistance targeted at keeping vulnerable vets in safe situations, addressing rental and other eligible arrears, and implement the shallow subsidies expansion. The program spent over a billion dollars during the pandemic getting veterans off the street and into hotels and motels while they found more permanent housing. This temporary increase would cement gains made in veteran homelessness during the pandemic.
- c. **\$230 million increase for the Grant and Per Diem Program (GPD) & Special Needs Reauthorization** to maintain an increase to the daily rate since social distancing has affected maximum occupancies and operating costs during the crisis and recovery period. This funding would also allow for two additional rounds of larger scale capital grants that are needed to extend the capabilities of service providers beyond the duration of the crisis.
- d. **\$54 million increase for the Housing and Urban Development – Veterans Affairs Supportive Housing (HUD-VASH) Program** for VA to provide additional VA or community contracted case managers. To increase the quality of services and increase voucher utilization and decrease case manager loads, increasing retention and rapport building capabilities.

HUD

\$100 million increase for HUD-VASH to increase the recovery capacity of communities to move veterans from motel/hotel placements into permanent housing rather than releasing them back to the streets.

- i. \$40M for HUD to provide 5,000 new Project Based Vouchers, that are not counted against PHA utilization rates and caps on project-basing of vouchers.
- ii. \$55M for HUD to provide for new Public Housing Authority incentives.
- iii. 5M for Tribal HUD-VASH

DOL

\$50 million increase for DOL's Homeless Veteran Reintegration Program (HVRP) and reauthorization through FY'24 aimed at helping at-risk veterans due to pandemic-related job loss. The program is looking to continue to expand access nationwide.

NCHV appreciates every dollar Congress has allocated to ending veteran homelessness and we also recognize the need to fund these obvious program improvements for the next year and beyond. Our collective mission is to not only reduce, but end veteran homelessness finally.

In Summation

Thank you for the opportunity to submit this testimony for the record and for your continued interest in ending veteran homelessness. It is a privilege to work with all of you to ensure that every veteran facing a housing crisis has access to safe, decent, and affordable housing paired with the support services needed to remain stably housed. We remain in a state of emergency and veterans experiencing and at-risk of homelessness need continued safe housing now more than ever. We thank you for your attention as we work collectively to lessen the impact that COVID-19 continues to have on veterans experiencing or at-risk of homelessness.

Appendix A

Active Legislation

S. 2172 - NCHV supports this critical legislation that makes necessary program adjustments to better accommodate homeless veterans with difficulties accessing services, as requested by *both* VA and service providers. It would expand public transportation for veterans to access care, provide stable housing, and deliver appropriate medical care for aging veterans while they await long-term care placement. Emphasizing continuous improvement, the bill includes an assessment of remaining barriers to securing permanent housing and longer-term program reporting to refine veteran housing outcomes.

S. 3094 - NCHV supports extending access to the HVRP program. NCHV recognizes this will increase the cost of the program, but these should be weighed against the cost benefits incurred by programs pairing HVRP employment services with their housing programs.

H.R. 5025 – NCHV supports this bill which would increase and extend the authorization of appropriations for homeless veterans' reintegration programs

H.R. 5301 – NCHV supports the provision of technical assistance to recipients of grants for supportive services for very low-income families in permanent housing and comprehensive service programs, and for other purposes.

H.R. 5470 – NCHV supports the *HOMES for our Veterans Act of 2021*. The bill would improve grants awarded by the Secretary of Veterans Affairs for comprehensive service programs to serve homeless veterans. It would remove barriers to continuing to provide veterans services, for service providers that have successfully serviced the veteran population originally requested in their contracts and whose community needs have changed.

H.R. 5606 – NCHV supports the *Return Home to Housing Act*. This bill is the stand-alone adjustment to the rate of per diem payments provided by the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to grantees that provide services to homeless veterans.

H.R. 5783 - NCHV supports extending access to the HVRP program. NCHV recognizes this will increase the cost of the program but these should be weighed against the cost benefits incurred by programs pairing HVRP employment services with their housing programs.