

Darryl J. Vincent Site Director US VETS -Hawaii

Testimony on the Needs of Homeless Veterans in Hawaii

Submitted to Senator Daniel Akaka

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Aloha Senator Akaka and other distinguished officials, my name is Darryl Vincent and I am the Hawaii Site Director for the United States Veterans Initiative, a non-profit agency that helps military veterans experiencing homelessness. In Hawaii, our facilities are located at Kalaeloa, at the former Barbers Point Naval Air Station, where we currently serve approximately 200 veterans.

I am here today to speak to you about the realities of homelessness among veterans in Hawaii, what United States Veterans Initiative is currently doing to reduce homelessness among Hawaii veterans, and, most importantly, I am here today to advocate for an expansion of known solutions that can reduce homelessness for our military veterans - and to request that these solutions be seriously considered in upcoming federal legislation and appropriations.

First the realities -

For many, the face of modern homelessness began with the image of the homeless veteran - sign in hand, often wheelchair-bound, asking for food, shelter, a job - on the streets and at the stop signs of nearly every town in America. Still today, despite pockets of progress, the VA estimates that 250,000 military veterans in America will be sleeping on the streets tonight. In Hawaii, that number is estimated to be as many as one thousand (1,000) veterans. One third of America's adult male homeless population is estimated to be veterans and in Hawaii it is no different. Tonight, many homeless veterans in Hawaii will be sleeping at beach parks, in cars, at bus-stops, on sidewalks, and other places not suitable for human habitation. Others remain in emergency shelters, without appropriate services and treatment.

And the flow of veterans continues - from older veterans who served during the Vietnam era, to veterans of the Gulf War, and most tragically even young veterans back from Iraq and Afghanistan.

For soldiers who escape physical and mental injury, it remains tough for many that are returning without jobs, and to a rental market that has priced them out of a home or even an affordable apartment rental. For veterans returning with post-traumatic stress disorder and other trauma-related injuries from war, the transition back into their community will be a most difficult one. Research shows that veterans typically experience homelessness a few years after military discharge, after the support of family and friends has been exhausted, after failed attempts at successfully reintegrating back into the community, or after the full effects of their physical and mental injuries have taken their toll. Whenever they call for help, we must remain firm in our commitment to these honorable men and women.

We also wonder how many more veterans will come through our doors in the next year, two years, and five years. We wonder, with so many soldiers from Hawaii having been deployed, will the state be prepared for their unique needs in the future? The full effects are often not seen for a few years - but 30 years of modern homelessness guarantees us - that more veterans will need assistance. As a veteran myself, I feel that is a crime that we have allowed those who once committed themselves to die for our freedoms to plummet to homelessness.

That's the reality - past, present and future. Now, a little about what Unites States Veterans Initiative does - which offers a strong blueprint for what can be done to help more veterans. Since opening in 2002, Unites States Veterans Initiative has provided over 800 homeless veterans with holistic, residential treatment services - including medical, mental health and substance abuse treatment, employment reintegration and housing placement. We have also provided an additional 1,500 veterans with outreach and referral to other needed programs. Services are provided in collaboration with the local VA and through key partnerships with other service provider agencies. Unites States Veterans Initiative-Hawaii is one of 11 sites operated by the United States Veterans Initiative, based in Inglewood, California that has been serving homeless veterans since 1992.

Unites States Veterans Initiative offers a two-stage housing and treatment program that incorporates time-tested, best-practice treatment and recovery principles. The first stage is our Veterans-in-Progress, or VIP program which serves about 250 homeless veterans annually. Our outreach staff scours over 60 public areas on Oahu where homeless veterans congregate - they engage them, talk to them, and encourage them to come to the Barbers Point facilities. Interested homeless veterans are then enrolled in the VIP program, where they receive immediate housing, meals, laundry, mail, transportation and all other essential services. Program fees are waived for veterans, until they begin receiving income. This allows the veterans to focus first on addressing substance abuse, mental illness and other medical problems - key barriers to employment, housing retention and full social integration.

For those in need of substance abuse treatment - the vast majority of those we serve - the veteran immediately enrolls in intensive outpatient substance abuse treatment - those with more complex dual-diagnosis needs are typically served by the VA. At our site in Hawaii, 8 of every 10 veterans we enroll will need substance abuse services. All receive a minimum of 90 days of treatment, more depending on their needs. To be sure, many veterans have lost their job, housing, and too often their family, because of substance abuse. Substance abuse is often caused by underlying mental illnesses like depression and post-traumatic stress disorder. Substance abuse often grew worse during their time of service. And we certainly advocate for better identification, prevention and treatment of substance abuse while in the military.

And our VIP program works. During 2006, over 83% maintain their sobriety while in the program and at time of discharge, 73% of veterans enrolled in Workforce Development find jobs, and 76% successfully transition into permanent housing or appropriate transitional housing. Many of those unsuccessful can often be served by re-enrolling them into the program - a second chance - when they are better ready and able to change their lives. Much of the success of the VIP program is due to the therapeutic community we foster at Barbers Point - staff cannot do it alone, veterans help fellow veterans, as buddies, peers, chaperones and informal counselors. We also attribute program success to the fact that after a veteran completes our VIP program they have the opportunity to move into our sober-living, long-term affordable housing, co-located at the Barbers Point facility.

This long-term housing is offered to veterans who have successfully completed the requirements of the VIP program, that have at least 90 days of being clean and sober, and that have an income to support living independently. The veteran continues to receive supportive services through case management and workforce development, but they are not held to the same structure as if they were in the program. And Veterans continue to be drug-tested on a regular basis. This allows a veteran to stay connected with the services that helped them in first place, while allowing the veteran to become more independent and self reliant - knowing there is still help

just a few feet away. More than 150 individuals have taken advantage of these sober-living independent housing, with many using it as a stepping-stone to full community reintegration.

So, what do we need? To handle both today's homeless veterans and tomorrow's homeless veterans there are three things that I would like to emphasize:

1) Funding Must Be Increased through the VA's Grant and Per Diem Program - Success with our VIP program funded by the Grant and Per Diem program shows that yes, money, when funding a successful program model, can reduce homelessness. Unfortunately, the current Per Diem rate of approximately \$29 per day per person, pays for only half of the real costs of effective treatment services - which for our Hawaii site is about \$55 per day - and that cost is delivered with a bare bones staff, paid much lower than VA staff salaries.

Access to collateral funding sources through HUD and the DOL have slowly evaporated - while the cost of services continues to grow. A long-term commitment to funding the VA's Grant and Per Diem program must include a greater funding commitment.

Programs like ours need to spend less time trying to find this additional money each year, and more time serving homeless veterans. Veterans deserve high-quality treatment by skilled professionals, not barely above minimum wage workers. We would like to open a program on Maui and the Big Island, but collateral funds will not be present. Try providing housing, treatment, transportation, food and other amenities on Maui for \$850 a month (the monthly per diem for one veteran)- you can't even rent an apartment for that amount.

At a minimum, we strongly advocate for a 20 percent increase in the Per Diem rate, an annual cost to the federal government of \$15 - \$20 million, a sum that will ensure the continuation of services provided by the other 300 per diem veteran service providers throughout America, and one that will ensure new programs can open to serve the remaining gap of homeless veterans identified by the VA.

2) Secondly, More Allocations Are Needed for Funding Alternative Vocational Training At our Barbers Point program, we have found it very effective to place veterans in the early stages of substance abuse into pre-employment vocational internship positions. These positions, such as running our veteran store, supervising the career center, directing meal services, apprenticing to be a resident manager, and assisting our maintenance and landscaping manager, provide the veteran with a transitional period of an employment-like experience while they go through our treatment program. Veterans are given small, but important stipends, \$200 per month or so, and learn a new skill, while maintaining participation in the treatment program, contributing to the healthy environment at United States Veterans Initiative and preparing for the eventual re-entry into the marketplace.

We feel modest funding in this area can produce great benefits. As you know, getting a job is often the easy part, maintaining the job and getting a job that has a career is the difficult job. Veterans often need a stepping stone that a vocational program - which we refer to as the Transitional Work Experience program - can offer. A program that they can participate in while still in treatment - that compliments the successes achieved in treatment while laying a stronger foundation for long-term recovery and self-sufficiency. An increase in the general per diem rate could help fund this type of program, and through separate appropriations. Congress can also take a more active role in helping to provide scholarships for retraining veterans in union apprentice programs and business training programs which are quite costly.

3) Finally More Funding is Needed For Sober Housing Supportive Housing Services - As I mentioned, a key component of the long-term success of our program, and the key component of any substance abuse program is the ability to maintain individuals in a sober and supportive

atmosphere. Our independent living apartments offer that opportunity and over 150 veterans have taken advantage of this opportunity. As we expand these units, we ask that the VA consider a funding stream to provide long-term supportive services to sober-living housing like ours - the cost is so minimal - we estimate \$5 per day per individual - compared to the cost of relapse and recidivism to homelessness.

On behalf of all the veterans we serve at Unites States Veterans Initiative I appreciate the time given to me to share with you how, together; we can do a much better job for our military veterans - in Hawaii and throughout the country. These three points I have emphasized come from the day-to-day tasks of delivering high-quality services - to our veteran heroes that have served their country.

I am available for questions or further elaboration. I would like to specifically thank Senator Akaka for his tireless dedication to serving our veterans and the people of Hawaii. As a veteran himself we know that he can relate and empathize with the many issues faced by our veterans and with his strong leadership and vision we can start to address and solve for these issues one day at a time.