

Statement for the Record  
Senator Richard Burr  
United States Senate Committee on Veterans Affairs  
Legislative Hearing  
May 22, 2019

Chairman Isakson, Ranking Member Tester, members of the Senate Committee on Veterans Affairs, thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony regarding S. 980, the Homeless Veterans Prevention Act and S. 1563, the Janey Ensminger Act.

The Homeless Veterans Prevention Act is dedicated to reducing the root causes of homelessness in the veteran population. In 2017, the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) released data that revealed roughly 40,000 veterans were living on the street, representing a 57% decline since 2010. VA reports indicate almost half a million veterans and their families have been permanently housed, rehoused, or prevented from homelessness from 2010 to 2017. This is an encouraging trend, but effectively ending the problem must be about facilitating greater self-determination, not just residential stability.

As a Senator for North Carolina, I'm proud of the tremendous leadership and generosity that communities in my state have shown to address the homeless veteran issue. With one of the largest veteran populations in America, North Carolina has a lower rate of homelessness than the national average, and serves as a model for the reforms S. 980 would direct the Veterans Administration to implement. The North Carolina Bar Association has helped provide attorneys that volunteer their time at the Salisbury VA Medical Center and the Fayetteville Vet Center, where they cover a variety of civil legal areas. Perhaps not coincidentally, Forsyth and

Cumberland counties, which house the Fayetteville and Salisbury VA markets, boast an effective rate of zero homeless veterans<sup>1</sup>.

Moreover, law schools at North Carolina Central University, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and Wake Forest University, all have veteran-specific legal clinics that focus on military record correction and discharge upgrades. Recently, a North Carolina Vietnam veteran came to one of these clinics with an Other Than Honorable (OTH) discharge for misconduct related to PTSD. Until he sought these legal services that assisted him with a discharge upgrade, he was unable to receive mental healthcare and benefits he needed. S. 980 includes a provision that would authorize VA to engage in public-private partnerships on a continuing basis with entities to provide vital legal services such as these to homeless veterans.

Time and again, my staff and I hear from veterans who have been unable to fully participate in existing programs because their children were not allowed to live in the transitional housing or in-patient domiciliary care. S.980 addresses this shortcoming, increasing the availability of housing for homeless veterans with dependents.

S. 980 repeals the sunset on the authority of the VA and the Department of Labor to carry out referral and counseling services for veterans transitioning from certain institutions, including penal institutions. North Carolina has had great success with the system of Veteran's Treatment Courts in the State. Since receiving a federal grant in 2016, Harnett County's Veteran's Court sees veterans from as far away as 70 miles. Forty-four veterans made their way through the program last year, and although the judges who sentence some of these veterans cannot reduce a minimum sentence, many of the veterans stay in the program to help resolve their issues long-term. Incarcerated veterans certainly represent a group that have been more prone to legal issues,

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.usich.gov/solutions/collaborative-leadership/mayors-challenge>

and could use help to get their life back on track after they serve their sentence. Finally, the bill directs the Comptroller General to assess and measure the capacity of programs for entities that receive grants or per-diem payments to assist homeless veterans, and use that information to ensure those programs are serving the needs of these veterans effectively.

The Homeless Veterans Prevention Act is a bi-partisan bill, and I am pleased that the American Legion, VFW, and several legal service providers and organizations like the American Bar Association have offered their support. Surely everyone can agree – the downward trend in homelessness among our nation’s veterans population has been remarkable. But we can, and should, do more. S. 980 would address four of the top ten unmet needs among our homeless veteran population, and I urge Committee members to support its passage.

S. 1563, the Janey Ensminger Act of 2019, is another common-sense, bipartisan bill included in today’s hearing. As a result of the Camp Lejeune Families Act of 2012, the Department of Veterans Affairs extends health care to veterans and reimburses medical expenses for qualified family members who have diseases and conditions that resulted from exposure to contaminated well-water at Camp Lejeune. If enacted, the Janey Ensminger Act would require the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR) Administrator to more frequently review scientific literature related to exposure of contaminated well-water at Camp Lejeune and specific illnesses or conditions incurred by individuals who served or lived there for not fewer than 30 days between 1953 and 1987. Furthermore, the Administrator would be required to categorize the level of evidence for these conditions, and publish the information on the Health and Human Services’ (HHS) website.

The transparency that would result from the passage of the Janey Ensminger Act is critical because, despite ATSDR determining that a number of cancers and other health

conditions were caused by the Camp Lejeune water contamination, the Veterans Administration continues to challenge these findings. This bill will remove the Veterans Administration's ability to deny, delay, or dispute the health care benefits owed veterans and their family members who are sick because of exposure to a toxic substance at Camp Lejeune. Care for veterans and their families should not be further delayed by the VA's failure to accept ATSDR's findings.

Thank you again to the Chairman and Ranking Member for the opportunity to submit written testimony, and I appreciate this committee's consideration of S. 980 and S. 1563. These proposals ensure we keep our promise to support the brave men and women who have volunteered to protect and served this great Nation. Thank you.