

Robin Hood Written Testimony

United States Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs

Call to Action: VA Outreach and Community Partnerships

Russell Senate Office Building, Room 418

April 24, 2012

On behalf of the Board of Directors and staff of Robin Hood, thank you for including us in this important discussion on community partnerships with the Veterans Administration, "*Call to Action: VA Outreach and Community Partnerships*".

The Robin Hood Foundation:

For context, Robin Hood's mission is simple – fight poverty in New York City. Since 1988, Robin Hood has focused on finding, funding, and creating programs and schools that generate meaningful results for families in New York's poorest neighborhoods. Over our 25-year history, Robin Hood has distributed more than \$1.25 billion to hundreds of New York City-based not for profit organizations.

Robin Hood Veterans Initiative:

Since our founding, Robin Hood's grantees have served veterans. But beginning in 2009, we noticed an uptick in the number of veterans relying on our food, job training, and housing programs. In response, we committed to tackling the issue more deliberately. In the spring of 2011, in partnership with the then-Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Mike Mullen, we raised a \$13-million fund to incubate new programs to support veterans and their families.

In advance of our investment, Robin Hood staff worked to understand the veterans landscape in New York City and were alarmed by the conditions that we saw for both veterans and the organizations in place to serve them and their families.

A few underlying challenges were most glaring:

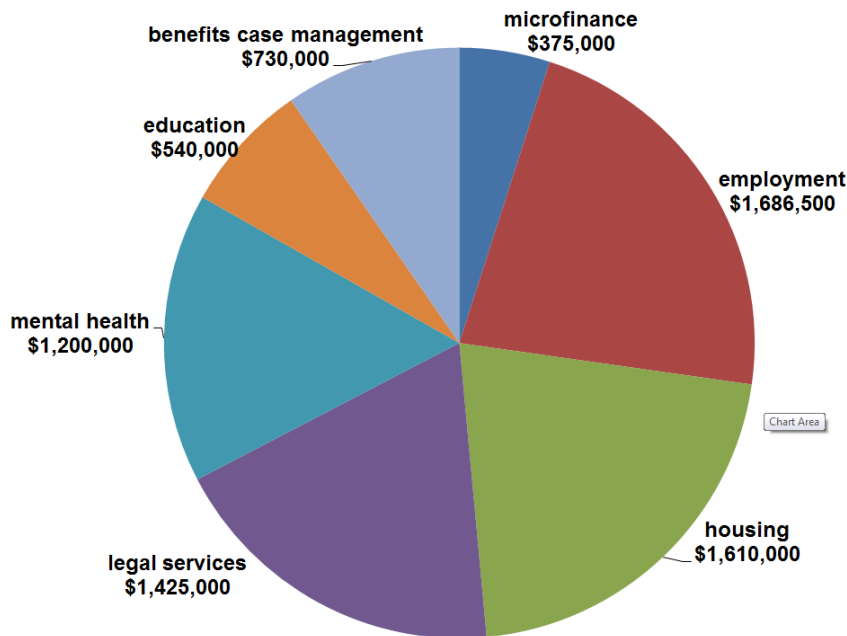
1. When veterans leave the military, they are discharged abruptly and without a support system to make a transition to civilian life.
2. Demographic data on veterans is incomplete and not centrally managed, making recruitment a major challenge.
3. The VA and its programs are not integrated with local communities.
4. And lastly, Veterans Service Organizations are not at a scale or quality to meet the demand.

We also recognized that there was an absence of leadership in the veterans space both nationally and locally, a leadership presence that was needed to engage a set of disparate partners to serve veterans more deliberately. Robin Hood has worked to fill some of that gap locally, both through grant making and through an informal network of government and private partners focused on the shared commitment to serve those who have served.

A few underlying principles have guided Robin Hood’s investment in the veterans space, lessons that we believe have national relevance. First, we relied on the City of New York, the City’s major funder of human services, to be our partner. The majority of our investment has been made in partnership with our local government, augmenting existing City programs. We believe that this coordination is a condition for success. Second, instead of relying on veterans’ service organizations to expand their reach, we instead chose to create new models with New York City’s most established not for profit service providers. Third, we formed an advisory board to ensure that the private sector both participated in our planning and was engaged in shaping new models of programming. Admiral Mullen and businessman Steve Cohen lead our advisory board.

To date, Robin Hood has made 25 grants totaling over \$7.5 million. The grants have served over 6,500 veterans and their families. In the coming year, we plan to spend an additional \$4.5 million, in effect spending the remainder of the fund. And while the special fund will exist no longer, its impact will continue. The grants we have made leave behind an institutional infrastructure for helping veterans, and the most successful of the veterans grants will carry on as core Robin Hood investments.

Below is the breakdown of our vets funding to date:



Program Highlights

Case Management / Benefit Connection:

It is well acknowledged that veterans and their families often struggle to find appropriate resources to thrive following their service. In fact, only about half of all veterans access benefits for which they are eligible.

This is not uncommon among poor New Yorkers generally. In response, Robin Hood created a program called Single Stop. Single Stop is a network of over 80 community-based sites citywide that serve 125,000 poor New Yorkers annually by screening and enrolling them in public benefits.

Our first step in our Veterans Initiative was to tap into this existing infrastructure to help needy veterans. First, in July 2013, we forged an innovative, cost-effective peer-based service model (veteran to veteran) to help 1,800 veterans and their families access public benefits, veterans' benefits, jobs, housing, mental health, education, and other social services. To date (April 2013), we have served over 500 needy veterans. Second, in October 2012, we expanded the Single Stop pilot to help 175 veterans tap veterans' benefits utilizing "accredited benefits counselors" at six sites across the city managed by the Bloomberg Administration. Finally, in April 2013, in partnership with the V.A., we forged a pilot initiative with three V.A. Medical Centers in Brooklyn, Manhattan, and the Bronx to provide Single Stop services (access to public benefits, jobs, housing and other social services) to 1,750 veterans identified as homeless or at risk of becoming homeless. And we do so to help the V.A. in its quest to eliminate veterans' homelessness by 2015.

Veterans' Legal Services:

Poor veterans, like other poor New Yorkers, often need legal services. In fact, given the unique burden placed on service members and their families, and the prevalence of mental health and substance abuse issues, the needs may be even greater, and more varied, than the typical poor household. Thus, in October 2011, Robin Hood partnered with three trusted legal providers to provide free legal services to 800 low-income veterans citywide. Since then, we have added a fourth legal partner. To date (April 2013), the four legal providers have helped over 1,200 needy veterans with free legal services.

Mental Health:

One in five veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan reports a service-related disability or suffers from post-traumatic stress or major depression.

In the decade between 2002 and 2012, 2.4 million service members have left active duty and have become eligible for V.A. health care with roughly 900,000 registering with the V.A.. Assessments of the electronic medical records for those who were evaluated by the V.A. show that approximately 22 percent of veterans evaluated were diagnosed with depression, and the prevalence of P.T.S.D. among these veterans was reported at 29 percent. Furthermore, the suicide rate for veterans is staggering; 18 veterans die daily by their own hands.

Yet, a primary reason that returning veterans fail to seek treatment is perceived stigma. Many individuals fear that seeking mental-health services will jeopardize their career, community standing or both. Others are reluctant to expose their vulnerabilities to providers who may also be armed forces personnel themselves, given the military's emphasis on strength, confidence and bravery. And some veterans have found the settings or providers they used especially bureaucratic or unsatisfactory in other ways, and would pursue a different option if available.

To date, we have invested \$1.2 million across 3 grantees providing mental health services to veterans. We have enabled the Langone Medical Center at New York University School of Medicine's Military Veteran Clinic to provide family-focused, comprehensive outreach, screening, treatment and follow-up for mental health disorders for low income veterans and their families. In year one alone, over 300 families will be served through an intensive out-patient model. In addition, we have partnered with Vets Prevail to provide free, online cognitive behavior counseling, e-learning and peer-to-peer support for returning veterans outside the V.A. – the idea being to provide an easily accessible, stigma-free option to veterans otherwise falling through the cracks. Our partnership with Give an Hour, a member-based organization of therapists, has provided more than 70,000 hours of free therapy to veterans and their families facing bouts of depression and P.T.S.D. The therapeutic service is now being copied across the country.

Moving forward, we will push to further expand the presence of veteran and veteran family programming at the private medical institutions in New York City.

Jobs:

There are 240,000 veterans living in New York City of whom 7 percent are unemployed.¹ The unemployment rate for veterans who served in the military since September 2001 (Gulf War-era II veterans) is 12 percent. It is more than twice that rate for young veterans (those ages 18 to 24) who served during Gulf War era II at roughly 29.1 percent for 2011.² The grants we've made focus on job training and placement and will help veterans build upon their existing skills to find work in growing sectors where employers are hiring. Our largest partnership to date is with the City of New York's Workforce One (WF1) system, where we've provided \$600,000 to increase the number of veterans and their spouses that are placed in jobs to almost 1,500 annually. Through a new grant to Helmets to Hardhats, we project that 200 veterans will be placed in union apprenticeships, primarily in the trades, in the coming year.

In total, we have invested just shy of \$2 million in over eight organizations related to employment and training.

Veterans Housing:

In November 2009, President Obama and Secretary of Veterans Affairs Eric Shinseki announced a commitment by the federal government – to end homelessness amongst our veterans in five years, by

¹ U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs

² U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics

2015. Vets make up approximately 6 percent of the New York State population, but are at least 10 percent of New York City's street homeless population.

To date, Robin Hood has invested \$1.6 million towards housing and homeless services for our city's veterans. A grant of \$785,000 has been allocated to three direct service providers (Bowery Residents' Committee, Goddard Riverside and Common Ground Community) in partnership with the city's Department of Homeless Services and the local V.A. Thus far, we have been able to bring 240 veterans out of the cold and put them on a path to permanent housing. We estimate that only 50 chronically street homeless veterans remain on our city's streets today, down from 300 veterans just 18 ago. This successful veterans outreach grant was the first of its kind nationally.

In addition to tackling street homelessness, Robin Hood made a grant in April 2012 of \$200,000 to Homeward Bound, Jericho Project's new program for moving low-income veterans into affordable, independent housing. With this grant, Jericho will help 60 homeless and unemployed vets connect to employment, financial counseling and entitlements, and ultimately secure permanent, affordable housing.

Since July 2009, we have supported the Doe Fund, Inc.'s Porter Avenue veterans' shelter and employment program to connect homeless veterans with employment and permanent housing. Last year alone, 240 veterans received temporary housing, with almost 70 of them securing permanent jobs and over 120 to permanent housing. Last year's grant was \$100,000 towards case management staff. Since 2009, Robin Hood has granted Doe Fund \$775,000 towards its veterans work (\$475,000 of which was granted prior to the establishment of our Veterans Fund).

Beyond our grant making, Robin Hood convened the HUD-VASH Boot Camp in August 2011 (ongoing) to support regulatory reform to expedite HUD-VASH supportive housing process to house more homeless veterans by collaborating with city agencies, the V.A., non-profits and the Interagency Council on Homelessness. So far these efforts have reduced by half the time for veterans to move into housing (to 123-181 days from 240-360 days).

Education:

Education is a true path out of poverty, and we have invested \$615,000 in two organizations to help keep vets on that path. The number of veterans enrolled at City University of New York's (CUNY) six community colleges has increased remarkably. In spring 2008, 299 student veterans were enrolled at the six community colleges. The figure increased to 998 student veterans by spring 2010. However, only one in five veterans graduates from CUNY's community colleges within six years.

Our grant to Project for Return and Opportunity in Veterans' Education (PROVE) is supporting veterans who are newly-enrolled college students, assisting them as they transition from military service to student life within the CUNY community college system. We have also made a grant to Iraq/Afghanistan Veterans of America, in partnership with the Mayor's Office of Adult Education, to help 150 O.E.F./O.I.F. veterans avoid predatory for-profit colleges.

Aligning the VA with Communities:

The Robin Hood investment in the veterans' space is one example of community resources available to veterans and their families. These programs, along with a much larger cohort of City, State, Federal and

other privately funded programs, make up an impressive mosaic of supports that are accessible and appropriate to augment VA services. And despite some progress on the part of the Veterans Administration, our work in New York City leaves us to conclude that the V.A. operates in relative isolation; disconnected from public and private resources that are fundamental to the livelihood and health our nation's veterans. Robin Hood asks the United States Senate and Veterans Administration to consider a deliberate shift as it pertains to community partnership and local resources.

Fundamentally, government does not transition soldiers from military life to civilian life, and the V.A. fails to create a safety net for soldiers after discharge. The Department of Defense and the V.A. need to better support this transition. This would include a process to connect soldiers to jobs or college in advance of discharge and a commitment to facilitate timely benefits, housing and health care for our veterans that need help the most. And while we are hopeful that the D.O.D.'s redesigned Transition Assistance Program will improve the transition, we are also skeptical that the plans go far enough to ensure an effective safety net.

Presuming that a full shift in the discharge process is unrealized in the near term, and considering the 2.4 million veterans already living a civilian life, the V.A. needs to develop a community "blueprint" by which VA medical and social service staff can access local resources in a more deliberate and strategic way. As outlined above, the large majority of resources developed under Robin Hood's watch are not core deliverables managed by the V.A., instead, we've focused on employment, education, housing placement, case management, benefit enrollment, and legal services. These programs, save the connection to VA benefits that are in some cases funded by V.A. subcontractors, fall outside of the scope of VA staff though are critical elements associated with veterans' transition and ongoing life outside of the military. These resources are largely funded by City and State government and are eligible to veterans and under utilized by veterans and their families. In each community, the VA needs to structure a process by which VA staff can smartly ensure that veterans access and enroll in these important programs that will complement the health care services made available by the VA. It is unrealistic to believe that a "community plan " will look the same in every community, though the VA should develop a set of criteria that establish these important connections, and local VA leadership should be evaluated on the effectiveness of these local partnerships with municipal government and private resources.

To this end, this spring, Robin Hood, the City of New York, the business community, and the not-for-profit sector will pilot a first of its kind veterans collaborative in New York City, and we ask the V.A. to join our effort to develop the connective tissue between the V.A. and the broader N.Y.C. community. Our team has been formed over the last 18 months and stands ready to formally collaborate with the V.A. to revamp our shared goal of ensuring financial and physical health for our veterans. I ask that the V.A. commit today to our New York City pilot to create a first of its kind model for reintegration.

On behalf of the entire Robin Hood community, thank you for your time and interest.