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Statement for the Record of the

National Coalition for Homeless Veterans

Before the

Committee on Veterans' Affairs, United States Senate

Hearing on Homeless Veterans

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Executive Summary

Part I ? Homelessness among Veterans

? Nearly 200,000 veterans are homeless on any given night; more than 400,000 experience homelessness over the course of a year.

? Like their non-veteran counterparts, veterans are at high risk of homelessness due to extremely low or no income, dismal living conditions in cheap hotels or in overcrowded or substandard housing, and lack of access to health care.

? In addition to these shared factors, a large number of homeless veterans experience problems that are directly traceable to their experience in military service or to their return to civilian society without appropriate transitional supports.

? Preventing and ending homelessness among veterans requires general responses of benefit to homeless persons and persons at risk for homelessness and specialized responses targeted to homeless veterans.

Part II ? VA and DOL Specialized Homeless Veteran Programs

? Enact the Sheltering All Veterans Act (S. 1180).

? Reauthorize the Homeless Provider Grant and Per Diem program for at least a five-year period at the \$200 million authorization level.

? Require VA to pay GPD grantees per diem payments without adjustments.

? Reauthorize the Homeless Veterans Reintegration Program for a five-year period at the \$50 million authorization level.

? Expand the eligible population for HVRP services to include veterans at imminent risk of homelessness.

? Require VA outreach plans and outreach efforts to add homelessness prevention matter as expected outreach content, including information on risk factors for homelessness, a self-assessment of risk factors, and contact information for preventative assistance associated with homelessness.

? Eliminate the 60-day restriction on access to the Homeless Veteran Dental Care benefit.

? Reauthorize the Homeless Veteran Service Provider Technical Assistance Program for a five-

year period at the \$1 million authorization level.

? Establish a specialized homeless program specific purpose account within the VA medical services appropriation.

? Authorize grants to homeless veteran service providers for public benefit and veteran benefit outreach, application assistance, and reconsiderations and appeals support.

### Part III ? VA Surplus Property

? Require VA to select the McKinney-Vento Title V Surplus Property Program as its first method for transferring real property to homeless service providers.

? Require VA to ensure that space agreements with homeless service providers are set without charge or at least at a rate not to exceed the direct costs associated with making it available.

? Urge the VA Secretary to take actions to assure greater usage of VA capital assets to respond to the human needs of veterans (and low-income persons in general secondarily).

### Part IV ? Servicemember Transition

? Enact the Veterans' Enhanced Transition Services Act (S. 1341).

? Establish a policy of universal servicemember attendance in the Department of Labor's Transition Assistance Program.

? Strengthen DOD pre-separation counseling to ensure equity in its delivery to servicemembers regardless of component, branch, rank, duty station, and other factors.

### Part V ? Permanent Housing for Low-Income Veterans

? Enact the Services to Prevent Veterans' Homelessness Act (S. 1991).

? Introduce and enact the Veterans' Housing Equity Act, NCHV's legislative proposal to develop and expand permanent housing opportunities for very low-income veterans.

? Ensure completion of Government Accountability Office study on housing assistance to low-income veterans.

## Introduction

The National Coalition for Homeless Veterans appreciates the opportunity to submit testimony on federal efforts to end chronic homelessness and stem future homelessness amongst veterans.

The National Coalition for Homeless Veterans (NCHV), established in 1990, is a nonprofit organization with the mission of ending homelessness among veterans by shaping public policy, promoting collaboration, and building the capacity of service providers. NCHV's over 250 member organizations in the states and territories provide housing and supportive services to homeless veterans and their families, such as street outreach, drop-in centers, emergency shelter, transitional housing, permanent housing, recuperative care, hospice care, food and clothing, primary health care, addiction and mental health services, employment supports, educational assistance, legal aid and veterans' and public benefit advocacy.

Our statement is organized in five parts. The first part offers a general overview on homelessness among veterans. The second part presents our recommendations for reauthorizing and

strengthening VA and DOL specialized homeless veteran programs. The third part outlines legislative and management recommendations regarding the use of VA surplus property for homeless purposes. The fourth part presents our legislative recommendations on servicemember transition, a strategy for preventing veteran homelessness. The fifth part presents our recommendations regarding permanent housing for homeless and other low-income veterans.

## Part I ? Homelessness among Veterans

The VA estimates that nearly 200,000 veterans are homeless on any given night; more than 400,000 experience homelessness over the course of a year. Conservatively, one of every three homeless adult males sleeping in a doorway, alley, box, car, barn or other location not fit for human habitation in our urban, suburban, and rural communities has served our nation in the Armed Forces. Homeless veterans are mostly males (2 percent are females). 54 percent are people of color. The vast majority are single, although service providers are reporting an increased number of veterans with children seeking their assistance. 45 percent have a mental illness. 50 percent have an addiction.

America's homeless veterans have served in World War II, Korea, the Cold War, Vietnam, Grenada, Panama, Lebanon, anti-drug cultivation efforts in South America, Afghanistan, and Iraq. 47 percent of homeless veterans served during the Vietnam Era. More than 67 percent served our nation for at least three years and 33 percent were stationed in a war zone.

Male veterans are 1.3 times as likely to become homeless as their non-veteran counterparts, and female veterans are 3.6 times as likely to become homeless as their non-veteran counterparts. A random survey of homeless veteran service providers conducted in November 2005 by NCHV suggests the homeless veteran population is changing in profile. Results of the survey identify three veteran subpopulations that may present significant increases in demand for services in the immediate future: aging Vietnam veterans, women veterans, and combat veterans of America's current operations in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Like their non-veteran counterparts, veterans are at high risk of homelessness due to extremely low or no income, dismal living conditions in cheap hotels or in overcrowded or substandard housing, and lack of access to health care. In addition to these shared factors, a large number of at-risk veterans live with post traumatic stress disorders and addictions acquired during or exacerbated by their military service. In addition, their family, social, and professional networks are fractured due to lengthy periods away from their communities of origin and their jobs. These problems are directly traceable to their experience in military service or to their return to civilian society without appropriate transitional supports.

Contrary to the perceptions that our nation's veterans are well-supported, in fact many go without the services they require and are eligible to receive. One and a half million veterans have incomes that fall below the federal poverty level, including 634,000 living below 50 percent of the federal poverty level. Neither the VA, state or county departments of veteran affairs, nor community-based and faith-based service providers are adequately resourced to respond to these veterans' health, housing, and supportive services needs. For example, the VA reports that its homeless treatment and community-based assistance network serves 100,000 veterans annually. With an estimated 400,000 veterans experiencing homelessness at some time during a year and

the VA reaching only 25 percent of those in need, 300,000 veterans remain without services from the department responsible for supporting them. Likewise, other federal, state, and local public agencies—notably housing and public health departments—are not adequately responding to the housing, health care and supportive services needs of veterans. Indeed, it appears that veterans fail to register as a target group for these agencies.

Like their non-veteran counterparts, preventing and ending homelessness among veterans requires public commitment and action—including Congressional action—to ensure access to housing, income, and health security. This must be accomplished both through general responses of benefit to homeless persons and persons at high-risk for homelessness and through specialized responses targeted to homeless veterans.

## Part II ? VA and DOL Specialized Homeless Veteran Programs

Congress has established a small set of programs to address homelessness among veterans. The bulk of these programs are administered by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. Collectively, they are identified as VA's 'specialized homeless programs' and include medical care, domiciliary care, transitional housing, and supportive services centers. The programs reside within the Mental Health Service of the Veterans' Health Administration. Total spending on VA specialized homeless programs amounted to \$182 million in FY 2005 and is estimated to reach \$224 million in FY 2006. The Department projects FY 2007 spending on VA homeless programs to reach \$244 million, should Congress accept the President's budget request. These specialized homeless programs function not only as a safety net for homeless veterans unable or hesitant to access emergency shelter, transitional housing or supportive services organized for the general population, they also function as a safety valve when other VA programs fail—largely due to insufficient resources—to reach veterans at high-risk of homelessness, such as veterans with chronic mental illnesses and addictions.

In addition, the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL) administers the Homeless Veterans Reintegration Program (HVRP), a job placement and supportive services program targeted to veterans experiencing homelessness. Total spending on HVRP amounted to \$20 million in FY 2005 and is appropriated at \$22 million in FY 2006. The President's FY 2007 budget requests \$22 million for HVRP.

Many of the specialized homeless veteran programs that Congress has authorized are scheduled to sunset in 2006 and merit extension. In addition, new issues affecting homeless veterans and a greater understanding of the gaps in supports for them have emerged that require a Congressional response. NCHV urges Congress to reauthorize, strengthen, and expand the specialized homeless programs and authorities of the Department of Veterans Affairs and the Department of Labor this year.

The National Coalition for Homeless Veterans is pleased to support the Sheltering All Veterans Everywhere Act (S. 1180). We are proud that the following organizations join us in supporting this measure: Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States, National Alliance to End Homelessness, National Alliance on Mental Illness, National Health Care for the Homeless Council, National Law Center on Homelessness & Poverty, National Network for Youth,

Paralyzed Veterans of America, Volunteers of America, Disabled American Veterans, National Coalition for the Homeless, and The American Legion.

We extend our deep gratitude to Senator Barack Obama (D-IL) for catapulting homeless veteran issues onto the Senate agenda by introducing this comprehensive measure. We also extend our appreciation to the other U.S. Senators, including Senator Patty Murray (D-WA) on this Committee, who have already co-sponsored the measure. We invite all members of the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee to join as co-sponsors to S. 1180.

We urge Congress to enact the Sheltering All Veterans Act this year, either as a stand-alone measure or by incorporating its provisions in another measure. We offer the following comments on the provisions of S. 1180.

Reauthorization of Homeless Providers Grant and Per Diem Program (Section 3) ? The Homeless Providers Grant and Per Diem (GPD) Program (38 U.S.C. 2011-2013) provides competitive grants to community-based, faith-based, and public organizations to offer transitional housing or service centers for homeless veterans. The GPD program is set to expire September 30, 2006. The current authorization level for the program is \$99 million. Collectively, nearly 100 GPD providers offer nearly 10,000 transitional housing beds. More than 150 outreach and transportation vans are supported through the program.

VA reports that 75 percent of veterans provided residential services through either a GPD grantee or a homeless Domiciliary Residential Rehabilitation and Treatment Program (DRRTP) were either independently housed or moved to another residential program at discharge. 58 percent of those discharged were employed or participating in Compensated Work Therapy. A VA-conducted follow-up assessment of the outcome of these same programs found that 80 percent of veteran residents were still housed 12 months after discharge.

The GPD program is an essential component of the VA's continuum of care for homeless veterans, assuring the availability of social services, employment supports, and direct treatment or referral to medical treatment to numerous veterans annually. Congress must continue the GPD program. In addition to supporting Section 3 of S. 1180, we support an element of the Senate-passed Veterans Health Care Act of 2005 (S. 1182) that provides permanent authority to the Grant and Per Diem Program.

The current authorization level for GPD is simply insufficient to enable VA to meet the demand for transitional housing assistance expressed by homeless veterans. Data gathered by VA Medical Centers (VAMCs) through the Community Homelessness Assessment, Local Education, and Networking Groups (CHALENGs) process consistently document that the numbers of homeless veterans in their service areas far exceed the number of GPD beds currently available for them. Without an increase in the authorization level, VA will not be able to add new beds. The \$130 million authorization level VA is seeking, and which is included in S. 1182, will allow VA only to maintain the current number of authorized beds, but not add new beds. Furthermore, as the per diem rate to cover the daily cost of care rises annually, there could be an actual reduction in the number of beds, if the authorization level is not increased. Accordingly, Congress should raise the authorization level to \$200 million. We note that even at this higher authorization level,

funding for GPD programs would still represent less than one one-hundredth of a percent of VA's total budget.

GPD Per Diem Payments (Section 3) ? Congress's intent when it adopted 38 U.S.C. 2012(a) (2) was to simplify the process for paying GPD grantees. Regrettably, VA is requiring GPD grantees to submit extensive documentation on all of their sources of project funding in order to secure per diem payments at the maximum rate permitted by statute (which is the rate authorized for State homes for domiciliary care), straining grantees and VA alike. This requirement basically hampers providers from using their other funds as leverage, and instead forces them to use them as subsidy.

In addition, grantees report a burden in preparing the documentation VA requires to negotiate the rate. Despite grantee appeals for intercession and Congressional intervention on a situation-by-situation basis, VA policy remains unchanged. Accordingly, we urge Congress to amend the statute to require VA to pay GPD grantees per diem payments without adjustments.

Reauthorization of Homeless Veterans Reintegration Program (Section 4) ? The Homeless Veterans Reintegration Program (HVRP) (38 U.S.C. 2021), within the Department of Labor's Veterans Employment and Training Service (VETS), provides competitive grants to community-based, faith-based, and public organizations to offer outreach, job placement and supportive services to homeless veterans. HVRP grants address two objectives: (a) to provide services to assist in reintegrating homeless veterans into meaningful employment within the labor force, and (b) to stimulate the development of effective service delivery systems that will address the complex problems facing homeless veterans. HVRP is set to expire September 30, 2006. The current authorization level for the program is \$50 million.

HVRP is the primary employment services program accessible by homeless veterans and the only targeted employment program for any homeless subpopulation. Homeless veterans have many additional barriers to employment than non-homeless veterans due to their lack of housing. HVRP grantees remove those barriers through specialized supports unavailable through other employment services programs. Grantees are able to place HVRP participants into employment for \$2,100 per placement, a tiny investment for moving a veteran out of homelessness, and off of dependency on public programs.

We urge Congress to reauthorize the Homeless Veterans Reintegration Program for a five-year period at the \$50 million authorization level. We note that the House-passed Veterans Housing and Employment Improvement Act of 2005 (H.R. 3665) accomplishes this recommendation.

Furthermore, we challenge each member of the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee ? especially those members also serving on the Appropriations Committee ? to communicate with their counterparts on the Appropriations Committee and insist that Congress honor the authorization level that the Veterans' Affairs Committee has set for HVRP.

HVRP Expansion to Veterans at Imminent Risk of Homelessness (Section 4) ? HVRP in its present form is limited to veterans currently experiencing homelessness (38 U.S.C. 2021(a)). This eligibility limitation prevents grantees from using HVRP funds for homelessness prevention. This eligibility restriction was appropriate when HVRP was first enacted in 1987. At

the time, the hope was that homelessness could be resolved by an intensive infusion of resources to literally homeless people. In 2005, restricting the program to veterans already homeless is out of step with the general thrust of both public policy and service delivery practice away from simply managing homelessness to also preventing it. Expansion of the eligible population for HVRP services to include veterans at imminent risk of homelessness would enable HVRP to have both preventative and remedial purposes.

Also, HVRP is being used as the account to fund a joint Department of Labor and Department of Veterans Affairs initiative authorized by Congress to assist veterans incarcerated in their reentry to the community. Continued use of HVRP to fund this program is technically a violation of the statute in that veterans incarcerated are not homeless. This technical violation could be easily remedied by adding veterans at imminent risk of homelessness as an eligible population to the program.

Expansion of VA Outreach Programs (Section 5) ? Servicemembers separating from the Armed Forces receive opportunities to learn about benefits for which they may be eligible, both prior to separation (through pre-separation counseling and the Transition Assistance Program) and post-discharge via Department of Veterans Affairs outreach. VA outreach provides an opportunity, as yet untapped, to alert recently separated servicemembers to the increased risk of homelessness they face and the preventative services available to them if they find themselves at imminent risk of losing their living arrangement.

Current law (38 U.S.C. 7722) requires VA to conduct a range of outreach efforts to alert veterans to the programs and services available through the Department. Also, current law (38 U.S.C. 2022) requires VA to develop a coordinated plan by the Mental Health Service and the Readjustment Counseling Service for joint outreach to veterans at risk of homelessness and an outreach program to provide information to homeless veterans and veterans at risk of homelessness. Individuals leaving the military are at elevated risk of homelessness due to a lack of job skills transferable to the civilian sector, disrupted or dissolved family and social support networks, and other risk factors that preceded their military service. Separating servicemembers must be made aware of the factors that contribute to homelessness and receive information about sources of preventive assistance at each stage of their separation.

A robust outreach program not only informs veterans of services available to them should they become homeless, but also to guide them on steps they may take to avert homelessness. Congress should require VA outreach plans and outreach efforts to add homelessness prevention matter as expected outreach content, including information on risk factors for homelessness, a self-assessment of risk factors, and contact information for preventative assistance associated with homelessness.

Current law (38 U.S.C. 2022) requires VA, in its outreach program, to target veterans being discharged or released from institutions after inpatient care. Congress should add as an additional target population individuals separating from the armed forces.

Reauthorization of Health Care for Homeless Veterans Program (Section 6) ? Current law (38 U.S.C. 2031) authorizes VA to provide outreach services; care, treatment, and rehabilitative services; and therapeutic transitional housing assistance to veterans with serious mental illness,

including veterans who are homeless. VA uses this authority to operate its Health Care for Homeless Veterans program. 134 existing HCHV teams across the country provide targeted outreach, medical treatment, and referral services to 67,000 homeless veterans annually. This authority expires December 31, 2006. Congress should continue this authority for at least a five-year period.

Reauthorization of Comprehensive Service Centers (Section 6) ? Current law (38 U.S.C. 2033) authorizes VA to provide comprehensive services centers to homeless veterans. VA's Comprehensive Homeless Centers place the full range of VA homeless efforts in a single medical center's catchment area and coordinate administration within a centralized framework. This authority expires December 31, 2006. Congress should continue this authority for at least a five-year period.

Transfer of Foreclosure Properties (Section 7) ? Current law (38 U.S.C. 2041) authorizes VA to sell, lease, or donate foreclosed properties to homeless service providers for purposes of assisting homeless veterans and their families in acquiring shelter. The program has proven invaluable to federal and community efforts to provide permanent housing for persons experiencing homelessness. Congress should make permanent the transfer authority. Further, Congress should require VA to dispose of at least ten percent of transferred properties via donation.

Reauthorization of Special Needs Grant Program (Section 8) ? Current law (38 U.S.C. 2061) authorizes VA to carry out a program to make grants available to health care facilities of the Department and to GPD providers to encourage development of programs for homeless veterans with special needs, including women (with and without children), frail elderly, terminally ill, or chronically mentally ill. This program is authorized through FY 2005 at the \$5 million level annually. The special needs program has enabled VA and GPD providers to devote attention to underserved subpopulation within the homeless veteran population. Congress should continue the program for a five-year period. Further, Congress should maintain the current authorization level of \$5 million.

Expansion of Homeless Veteran Dental Care Benefit (Section 9) ? Current law (38 U.S.C. 2062) establishes a limited dental care benefit for certain homeless veterans. Under the provision, homeless veterans in certain VA homeless programs are eligible for a one-time course of dental treatment which is medically necessary for veterans to gain employment, to alleviate pain, or to treat disease. The requirement that a homeless veteran participate in a VA residential program for at least 60 days is an inappropriate ? and unjust ? impediment to veterans' timely access to medically necessary services. Congress should eliminate the 60-day eligibility restriction.

Reauthorization of Homeless Veteran Service Provider Technical Assistance Program (Section 10) ? Current law (38 U.S.C. 2064) authorizes VA to make competitive grants to organizations with expertise in preparing grant applications to provide technical assistance to nonprofit community-based and faith-based groups with experience in providing assistance to homeless veterans in order to assist such groups in applying for homeless veteran grants and other grants addressing problems of homeless veterans. Community-based and faith-based organizations serving homeless veterans rely on a complex set of funding and service delivery streams with multiple agencies in order to assemble comprehensive housing and supportive services. These providers face a capacity gap around managing this complexity. NCHV is proud to have



successfully competed for funding under this program. We believe we have been effective stewards of the TA funds and look forward to participating in future competitions. Congress should continue the program for a five-year period. Further, Congress should raise the authorization level from \$750,000 to \$1 million. We are pleased that S. 1182 addresses this recommendation.

Annual Report on Assistance to Homeless Veterans (Section 11) ? Current law (38 U.S.C. 2065) requires VA to submit to Congress an annual report on assistance to homeless veterans. Congress should require VA to include in the general contents of the report information on their efforts to coordinate the delivery of housing and services to homeless veterans with other federal departments and agencies, including the Department of Defense, Department of Health and Human Services, Department of Housing and Urban Development, Department of Justice, Department of Labor, Interagency Council on Homelessness, and the Social Security Administration.

Reauthorization of Advisory Committee on Homeless Veterans (Section 12) ? Current law (38 U.S.C. 2066) establishes an Advisory Committee on Homeless Veterans to provide a formal mechanism for the Secretary to gather advice from the homeless veteran service provider field and others with expertise on homeless veteran matters. The Committee is set to expire December 31, 2006. The Committee has proved invaluable in impacting the VA's delivery of medical care and supportive services to homeless veterans. Congress should extend the Advisory Committee on Homeless Veterans for a five-year period.

Advisory Committee on Homeless Veterans Composition (Section 12) ? The U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness plays a leadership role in coordinating the federal government's response to homelessness. Congress should add the ICH Executive Director as an ex-officio representative on the Advisory Committee on Homeless Veterans.

Study on Military Sexual Trauma and Homelessness (Section 13) ? The VA Secretary's Advisory Committee on Women Veterans recommended in 2004 that a study be conducted on the possible correlation between military sexual trauma and homelessness among veterans and effective service models for assembling various treatment modalities and environments. The study should also include an evaluation of the 'Seeking Safety' intervention, a treatment regime being made available to homeless women veterans in eleven locations. Preliminary data from Seeking Safety participants indicates that over 80 percent reported a history of life-threatening trauma, over 60 percent had been raped (with over 40 percent of rapes occurring while serving in the military.)

In addition to the above provisions of the Sheltering All Veterans Everywhere Act (S. 1180), we also urge Congress to enact the following recommendations:

VA Homeless Programs Specific Purpose Account?Presently Congress plays a limited role in determining funding levels for medical programs within VA, including the Department's specialized homeless programs. Funding for veterans medical care is appropriated in aggregate to three accounts (medical services, medical administration, medical facilities), from which the VA Secretary allocates the appropriated funds across VA health care networks and through the Department's specific purpose programs.

Congress has routinely provided increased funding to VA for medical care. Regrettably, these increases have not been distributed equitably among VA specific purpose programs. Specialized homeless programs are among those that do not always receive their 'fair share' of annual appropriations, or allocations at their full authorized levels. The establishment of a specialized homeless program specific purpose account within the VA medical services account would serve to ensure that specialized homeless programs receive any increase in VA appropriations in proportion to their costs within the overall VA medical care budget.

We urge Congress to establish a specialized homeless program specific purpose account within the VA medical services appropriation and ensure that of such sums appropriated annually for VA medical services, the greater of a fixed sum of \$345,672,000 or 1.26 percent of the total medical services appropriation be reserved for specialized homeless programs.

VA should use funds within the homeless specific purpose account to operate: the program of the Department known as Domiciliary Residential Rehabilitation and Treatment Program for Homeless Veterans, comprehensive service programs (GPD) (Section 2011, Section 2012), outreach program (Section 2022), Health Care for Homeless Veterans (Section 2031); therapeutic transitional housing assistance (Section 2032), comprehensive services centers (Section 2033), CHALENG (Section 2034); administration of the loan guarantee for multifamily transitional housing program (Section 2051), grant program for homeless veterans with special needs (Section 2061), technical assistance grants for nonprofit community based groups (Section 2064), annual report (Section 2065), advisory committee on homeless veterans (Section 2066), the program of the Department known as Stand Downs, evaluation centers for homeless veterans programs, and any additional specialized homeless programs designated by the Secretary.

Authorization of Benefit Assistance for Homeless Veterans ?Veterans who are disabled by injury or disease incurred or aggravated during active military service are eligible for VA Disability Compensation, a monthly payment. Veterans are eligible for Social Security Disability Insurance and Supplemental Security Income benefits under the same conditions as any other person. Veterans are often eligible for both benefits. But because the programs themselves and their claims processes are distinct, a veteran must work their way through each one separately. Each process is grueling in and of itself. Navigation through both processes simultaneously merely compounds the complexity. In addition, scant attention is paid to assisting veterans in accessing mainstream health and income benefit programs for which they may be eligible including Medicaid, Food Stamps, and TANF. For homeless veterans?all of whom have higher priority needs such as securing a place to live, and some of whom either distrust or wish to avoid dependency on governmental programs?the various application processes may be insurmountable, without help. We urge Congress to authorize VA to carry out a program to make grants available to homeless veteran service providers for public benefit and veteran benefit outreach, application assistance, and reconsiderations and appeals support. Congress should authorize the program for a five-year period at the \$10 million level annually.

### Part III ? VA Surplus Property

NCHV works to ensure that organizations, agencies, and groups desiring to assist veterans with the most fundamental human needs secure the public and private resources, including capital assets, necessary to provide opportunities and supports to them. With an estimated 400,000

veterans homeless at some time during a year and the VA reaching only 25 percent of those in need, 300,000 veterans remain without services from the department responsible for supporting them. In the meantime, numerous VA properties sit vacant or underutilized. We urge Congress to take the following action steps to further facilitate the transfer of VA surplus property to homeless service providers:

**VA Preference for Title V Surplus Property Program ?** The McKinney-Vento Title V Surplus Property Program requires federal departments and agencies, including VA, to make surplus properties available to nonprofit and public organizations serving homeless persons, including homeless veterans, at no cost. Under current law (38 U.S.C. 8122(d)), VA has been able to avoid declaring property excess, and thus avoid listing it through the Title V process, by determining that the property is suitable for services to homeless veterans under an enhanced use lease. Enhanced use lease is less favorable to homeless service providers than Title V because under EUL, providers are expected to pay for the property, while under Title V the transfer is without charge. Congress should require VA to select Title V as its first method for transferring real property to homeless service providers.

**VA Space Agreements with Homeless Veteran Service Providers ?** VA enters into space agreements with nonprofit organizations to utilize VA capital assets for services to homeless veterans. The rates the Department negotiates with nonprofit organizations fluctuate greatly, and are sometimes above fair market rental rates or at rates that are cost-prohibitive to nonprofit organizations. Congress should require VA to ensure that space agreements with homeless service providers are set without charge or at least at a rate not to exceed the direct costs associated with making it available.

**Homeless Considerations in VA Capital Asset Planning ?** We are pleased that the Capital Asset Realignment of Enhanced Services (CARES) Commission, in its final report, recommended to the VA Secretary that 'any study involving excess or surplus property should consider all options for divestiture, including outright sale, transfer to another public entity, and a reformed EUL process. VA should also consider using vacant space to provide supportive services to homeless veterans' (p. 3-33).

We urge the Veterans' Affairs Committee to join us in requesting VA to be vigorous in ensuring that vacant or underutilized VA properties are first made available to organizations serving those in greatest need rather than continuing to gather dust or being converted to commercial purposes by including report language to accompany any appropriate bill urging the Secretary to take the following actions with regard to management of VA capital assets:

? issue a Department-wide directive that articulates that surplus, excess, unutilized or underutilized VA properties shall first be made available on a no-cost or lowest-cost basis to nonprofit or public organizations responding to the human needs of veterans (and low-income persons in general secondarily), with a preference for organizations experienced in serving homeless veterans;

? establish as a Departmental goal the establishment of at least 50,000 additional supportive housing units for homeless veterans on VA property and instruct VISNs to develop concrete action plans for reaching this goal;

? instruct VISNs to identify and advertise properties currently or potentially suitable and

available for disposition under the McKinney-Vento Title V program;  
? instruct VISNs to use the Title V criteria for determining suitability for homeless uses when conducting these property assessments; and  
? take action to ensure the Department's full compliance with the Title V program; prepare an analysis of VA property acquisition and disposition statutes, regulations, and policy guidance and their intersection with the Title V program; and recommend or adopt any changes needed in order for the VA to fully participate in the Title V program.

#### Part IV ? Servicemember Transition

Transition planning (or discharge planning) is understood within the homeless service and advocacy sector to be an important tool in homelessness prevention. Transition planning is the process used to prepare a person for return or reentry to the community from a custodial institution, setting, or situation, such as a hospital, inpatient treatment facility, or prison. The concept and practice of transition planning is germane to the military, as it is a de facto custodial institution, providing employment, housing, food, and health care to its servicemembers within. Thus, when seeking to prevent homelessness among veterans, one cannot overlook the period and process through which servicemembers transition from the military back to civilian life as a critical moment both for averting homelessness among the few servicemembers that enter homelessness immediately or soon after separation from the military and for putting servicemembers at risk of future homelessness on a sure path to economic and social well-being rather than a slippery slope into joblessness, family dissolution, and unmitigated poverty.

Congress has already put in place the mechanisms to accomplish transition planning for persons exiting the military. Current law (10 U.S.C. 1142) requires the Departments of Defense and Homeland Security to provide individual preseparation counseling to each member of the armed forces whose discharge or release from active duty is anticipated. Matters covered during the counseling include: a discussion of educational assistance, compensation, and rehabilitation benefits to which servicemembers are entitled; information concerning job search and job placement assistance; information concerning relocation assistance; information concerning medical and dental coverage; financial planning assistance; housing counseling assistance; and the creation of a transition plan for the servicemember. Preseparation counseling takes many forms, but tends to be brief group presentations to servicemembers immediately prior to their separation.

Generally, in the case of an anticipated retirement, preseparation counseling shall commence as soon as possible during the 24-month period preceding the anticipated retirement date. In the case of a separation other than retirement, counseling shall commence as soon as possible during the 12-month period preceding the anticipated date. Counseling shall be made available no later than 90 days prior to separation. Servicemembers being discharged or released before the completion of that member's first 180 days of active duty are not eligible for preseparation counseling, unless the separation is due to disability.

Current law (10 U.S.C. 1144) authorizes the Department of Labor to furnish counseling, assistance in identifying employment and training opportunities, help in obtaining such employment and training, and other related information and services to members of the armed forces who are being separated from active duty. Elements of this program, known as the

Transition Assistance Program (TAP), include information concerning employment and training assistance; information concerning Federal, state, and local programs and programs of military and veterans' service organizations; information about small business loan programs for veterans; information about the geographic locations to which members are returning; and other matters. Participation in the program is encouraged, not required. TAP is a two-and-a-half-day group-level workshop.

Former servicemembers report that the preseparation counseling and transition assistance programs are lacking in a number of areas. Among their concerns: the depth and content of preseparation counseling is quite variable across delivery sites. Preseparation counseling may be limited to brief group-level presentations rather than individualized transition planning (as is contemplated in the statute). Servicemember participation in the Transition Assistance Program is at the will of the unit commander, and often allowed only during off-duty time.

Weaknesses in the both the content and delivery of servicemember separation programs result in some servicemembers failing to receive information necessary to ensure their stable health care, steady employment, and secure housing upon their return to civilian life. This places servicemembers at increased risk of homelessness.

Several legislative measures have been introduced to strengthen the transition assistance experience. We support Senator Russell Feingold's (D-WI) Veterans' Enhanced Transition Services Act (S. 1341); Rep. Robert Andrews's (D-NJ) Servicemembers' Enhanced Transition Services Act (H.R. 2074); and Rep. Martin Meehan's (D-MA) HEROES Act (H.R. 2411) and are pressing the Armed Services Committees to include provisions from these bills in their annual defense authorization measures. Our priorities within these measures are 1) establishment of a policy of universal servicemember attendance in the Department of Labor's Transition Assistance Program and 2) strengthened DOD preseparation counseling to ensure equity in its delivery to servicemembers regardless of component, branch, rank, duty station, and other factors.

We urge the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee to communicate support for legislative provisions regarding universal servicemember attendance in DOL TAP and strengthened DOD preseparation counseling to the Senate Armed Services Committee. Further, we encourage all members of the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee to co-sponsor S. 1341 and ensure its enactment this session, whether that is through the NDAA, another omnibus vehicle, or as a stand-alone measure.

## Part V ? Permanent Housing for Low-Income Veterans

The ultimate strategy to prevent veteran homelessness is to ensure permanent housing opportunities for those veterans at greatest risk of losing their housing in the first place ? those with low-incomes. On this matter, the federal government falls far short.

While the federal government makes a sizeable investment in homeownership opportunities for veterans, there is no parallel national rental housing assistance program targeted to low-income veterans. Veterans of working age and without disabilities are not well-served through existing housing assistance programs due to their program designs. Low-income veterans in and of themselves are not a priority population for subsidized housing assistance. HUD devotes

minimal attention to the housing needs of low-income veterans, as exemplified by the long-standing vacancy in the position of special assistant for veterans programs within the Office of Community Planning and Development. Furthermore, HUD has discontinued its participation in the HUD-VASH program, the only housing assistance program that was targeted to any veteran population. (HUD-VASH set aside a share of rental assistance vouchers for veterans with disabilities, matched with supportive services provided by the Department of Veterans Affairs). VA has attempted in past years to reduce its support for veterans with long-term residential care needs via State Veterans' homes and other nursing homes and shift support for those currently served via nursing care to care in home- and community-based settings. But, low-income veterans requiring supervised living arrangements will then need homes and community-based settings in which to live and receive VA support. We need not wonder why there is a homelessness crisis among our nation's poorest veterans.

It is imperative that Congress take immediate action to respond to the permanent housing assistance needs of our nation's low-income veterans, including veterans experiencing homelessness. Among the routes to doing so:

Services to Prevent Veterans' Homelessness Act ? NCHV is pleased to support the Services to Prevent Veterans' Homelessness Act (S. 1991). We are proud that the following organizations join us in supporting this measure: National Alliance on Mental Illness, National Mental Health Association, National Health Care for the Homeless Council, Volunteers of America, and National Coalition for the Homeless.

We extend our appreciation to Senator Richard Burr (R-NC) for leading this important measure, and to the other U.S. Senators, including Senator John Thune (R-SD), who have already co-sponsored it. We urge all members of the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee to join as co-sponsors to S. 1991.

The Services to Prevent Veterans' Homelessness Act authorizes the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to provide financial assistance to nonprofit organizations and consumer cooperatives to provide and coordinate the provision of supportive services for very low-income veterans occupying permanent housing. The financial assistance shall consist of payments for each household provided supportive services. Supportive services that may be offered include physical and mental health; case management; daily living; personal financial planning; transportation; vocational counseling; employment and training; education; assistance in obtaining veterans benefits and public benefits; child care; and housing counseling. The bill would reserve \$25 million of the funds appropriated annually for veterans' medical care for this supportive services program.

The Services to Prevent Veterans' Homelessness Act is an important legislative measure from the standpoints of preventing and resolving homelessness among veterans. As a preventive measure, the Act would ensure the availability of supportive services to very low-income veterans in home-based settings, which enables them to sustain their housing arrangement. As a responsive measure, the Act would ensure the attachment of supportive services to permanent housing, a practice found to be effective in helping people experiencing homelessness transition from residential instability to housing security. The legislation would establish a mechanism for VA to form supportive services partnerships with community- and faith-based organizations. And the

program established by this Act will serve as a companion to an affordable housing production program targeted to very low-income veterans for which NCHV is seeking authorization and appropriations.

We urge Congress to enact the Services to Prevent Veterans' Homelessness Act, either as a stand-alone measure or by incorporating its provisions in another measure.

**Veterans' Housing Equity Act** ? The National Coalition for Homeless Veterans has developed comprehensive legislation to develop and expand permanent housing opportunities for very low-income veterans. The legislation, the 'Veterans' Housing Equity Act,' would establish new programs and activities pertaining to veterans within the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). We are proud that the legislation enjoys the support of the Independent Budget Veterans Service Organizations and IBVSO supporters. NCHV is presently seeking a prime sponsor for the Veterans' Housing Equity Act in both the Senate and the House of Representatives.

The Veterans' Housing Equity Act consists of seven substantive sections. Section 2 authorizes the HUD Secretary to establish a supportive housing program for very low-income veteran families. HUD would provide housing assistance to such veteran families via planning grants, capital advances, project rental assistance, and technical assistance to nonprofit organizations and consumer cooperatives proposing to develop such housing. VA would provide funding for supportive services to residents. Section 3 authorizes an increase in budget authority under the project rental assistance component of the Housing Choice Voucher program to finance 20,000 rental assistance vouchers for homeless veterans. The vouchers would be administered by grantees under the VA Homeless Provider Grant and Per Diem program. Section 4 requires states and localities to include veterans as a special needs population in their public housing agency plans and their comprehensive housing affordability strategies. Section 5 exempts from calculation of a family's rental payment for federally assisted housing the amount of income the family receives from VA compensation and benefits. Section 6 authorizes the HUD Secretary to establish a technical assistance program to assist veteran service providers on federally assisted housing matters. Section 7 requires HUD to issue an annual report on its programs and activities pertaining to veterans. Section 8 establishes a position of Special Assistant for Veterans Affairs within HUD.

We urge Congress to introduce and enact the Veterans' Housing Equity Act.

**GAO Study of Low-Income Veterans' Permanent Housing Needs** ? Congress has taken initial steps to develop an evidence base for the need for permanent housing assistance targeted to low-income veterans by including language within the report to accompany the FY 2006 military construction and veterans' affairs appropriations measure that requires the Government Accountability Office (GAO) to conduct a study on housing assistance to low-income veterans. A report is due in spring 2006, but we do not believe GAO has even begun to start the study. We urge the Committee to ensure the GAO's timely completion of this required study.

**Permanent Housing Assistance as an Eligible Use of GPD Funds** ? Use of Homeless Provider GPD grant funds is currently limited to expansion, remodeling, or acquisition of facilities for use

as service centers, transitional housing, or other facilities to serve homeless veterans and to procurement of vans for use in outreach to and transportation for homeless veterans.

We are aware that consideration is being given to adding permanent housing as an eligible use of GPD funds. We are of mixed view on this point. On the one hand, we know that many homeless veteran service providers struggle to secure placement of some program participants in permanent units following their completion of transitional programs, due the shortage affordable low-income housing units generally and the veteran's ineligibility for or low priority for some of the assisted housing units that are available. On the other hand, we recognize transitional housing as an important and valid mechanism for providing supportive environments to homeless persons, including homeless veterans, while they navigate to successful independence. We are also aware that many GPD providers' program designs, facilities, and funding streams do not lend themselves readily to conversion to permanent units.

Accordingly, NCHV could support the addition of permanent housing assistance as an eligible use of GPD funds, but only on the conditions that: 1) the authorization level for GPD be raised to at least \$200 million, to assure that no current provider is displaced by a new start provider proposing a permanent project; 2) there be an assurance in statute that the VA Secretary shall allocate annual appropriations to GPD at the full \$200 million authorization level, again to assure non-displacement of transitional programs; 3) there be an assurance in statute that current and future per diem providers that wish to offer transitional housing services or service centers shall be permitted to do so without limitation; and 4) that there be a statutory prohibition on the VA granting preference or priority to continuation grantees or new start grantees proposing permanent housing projects. NCHV would vigorously oppose the conversion of GPD to a permanent housing-only program.

## Conclusion

The National Coalition for Homeless Veterans appreciates the opportunity to submit recommendations to Congress regarding the resources and activities of the federal government and community-based and faith-based organizations as they pertain to homeless veterans. We look forward to continuing to work with Congress, the Administration, and our membership to ensure that our nation does everything within its grasp to prevent and end homelessness among our nation's veterans. They have served our nation well. It is beyond time for us to repay the debt.

## Federal Funding

The National Coalition for Homeless Veterans has received the following Federal grants:

### FY04

Department of Veterans Affairs Grant to provide technical assistance to community based organizations with experience in assisting homeless veterans, \$517,422.

Department of Labor Grant to provide technical assistance to community based organizations with experience in assisting homeless veterans, \$86,313.



FY05-06

Department of Veterans Affairs Grant to provide technical assistance to community based organizations with experience in assisting homeless veterans, two year total award is \$1,112,500.