

Reverend Scott Rogers, Executive Director, Asheville Buncombe Community Christian Ministry

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Chairman Patty Murray, Ranking Member Richard Burr, and distinguished members of the U.S. Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs: It is my honor to present this testimony on behalf of the Asheville Buncombe Community Christian Ministry (hereafter ABCCM) and on behalf of the National Coalition for Homeless Veterans (NCHV) with my friend Mr. John Driscoll, NCHV President and CEO. I want to recognize the other guests in the room who are also concerned about ending homelessness among our veterans.

Introduction

ABCCM has had a U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Grant and Per Diem (GPD) contract since 2003. We currently have four Grant and Per Diem programs which encompass 148 homeless men and 10 homeless women (mothers with children) for a total of 158 beds. This makes us the third-largest contractor of Grant and Per Diem services in the nation. Our combined campus facilities of 12.5 acres, with 11 acres for men and 1.5 acres for women, makes us one of the largest facilities for serving homeless veterans in the nation.

Under ABCCM's umbrella, we offer employment and training services through a U.S. Department of Labor (DOL) Homeless Veterans Reintegration Program (HVRP) grant. Last year we placed 201 homeless veterans back into the workforce at an average cost of \$1,100 per participant, compared to \$2,600 per participant nationally. We were recently honored with being included in the HVRP Best Practices document for the DOL-Veterans' Employment and Training Service (VETS).

We also administer the DOL Veterans Workforce Investment Program (VWIP), which, through education and training, placed 101 veterans into new careers in 2011. Most of these were veterans recently released from the military. We found this program to be the most effective in helping them retool, reclaim, and embrace a new career path to sustain their families. We regret that this program is only slated for one more year of funding, and hope the Senate will take a lead in restoring VWIP. The impact of putting 302 veterans back into the workforce at an average of \$14.11/hour generated about \$8.8 million in payroll in 2011.

Both of these services are offered under the larger umbrella of ABCCM, which is supported by about 300 congregations of all sizes, nationalities, and faith groups. ABCCM is volunteer-driven with over 4,600 volunteers who actively participated in 2011. We served over 50,000 men, women, and children (unduplicated) in our community of about 250,000. This means we touched one in five persons in Buncombe County, North Carolina.

Other services offered by ABCCM include:

- “Crisis Ministry” services, which include emergency assistance of food, clothes, support to prevent eviction and utility cutoffs, heating assistance, and transportation.
- A vibrant Jail Ministry.
- One of the largest free clinics in North Carolina, offering medical, dental, and pharmacy care to about half of the uninsured in our county.
- Two additional education and training programs supported by DOL’s Pathways Out of Poverty and a Young Parents Demonstration Program called Circles®.

Three decades ago there was a strong emphasis on public/private partnerships, which gave the government new opportunities to combine its entitlement programs with private innovations. Two decades ago, we saw new strides made as the government sought to purchase services that were better provided by the community and community-based organizations. During the last decade, we have seen the government add the opportunity to partner with faith-based organizations.

Thank you for opening the door with us to explore public/ private, community- and faith-based partnerships. As a faith-based organization and one of the leading homeless veteran service providers in the country, ABCCM is demonstrating that this strategy has a major return on the Congressional investment. We commend Congress and the President’s support of the VA Grant Per Diem program, which funds about 14,500 beds and, according to NCHV, has stemmed the tide of homelessness for our veterans.

Even during these difficult economic times, we have made significant strides in reducing the overall number of homeless veterans. Thanks to the VA Grant and Per Diem program and our collaborating partner – the Charles George VA Medical Center-Asheville, North Carolina – we have changed homelessness among our veterans by placing 82-91% in the workforce and 73-89% in permanent housing since 2008.

Keys to Success

Collaboration is a key to our success. We are extremely grateful to VA for offering additional support to its medical centers to provide access to primary and mental health care for Grant and Per Diem providers. The Charles George VAMC in Asheville is a critical partner in our success. They consistently rank among the top-10 health care providers. This is demonstrated by the level of commitment they extend to our homeless veterans to be their medical home. Their care of our wounded warriors is exemplary and makes it possible for us to accept some of our highest and most at-risk veterans. We have had men who have been discharged from state mental health institutions with hopeless prognoses come to us and receive quality care at the Charles George VAMC, then go on to thrive in our environment. The combination of putting them in a safe and supportive environment, where they live with other veterans who embrace them as companions, mentors, trainers, and caregivers, adds a value that enables us to consistently help these men and women achieve stability, sustainable incomes, and permanent housing.

The Charles George VAMC in Asheville has adopted a “Working Five Year Plan” to end homelessness. They have adopted six pillars in the plan to prevent and end homelessness, which includes VA leadership involvement and support:

- 1) Outreach and education
- 2) Housing and supportive services
- 3) Treatment services
- 4) Prevention services
- 5) Income, employment, and access to benefits
- 6) Community partnerships

We have outlined specific metrics to expand outreach, reduce barriers to services, and increase resources through our collaborative efforts to offer veterans comprehensive services along the continuum of care.

Another key collaboration in our community is the Asheville Homeless Coalition and Continuum of Care. Our community is one of the early pioneers in developing and implementing the Ten Year Plan to End Homelessness. We have modified that plan in recent years to incorporate the Five Year Plan to End Homelessness among Veterans, as well as a plan to end chronic homelessness in our community in five years. This group of over 40 providers and advocacy groups has worked tirelessly to provide wrap-around services and strategic interventions, and can successfully report a steady decline in the total number of homeless over the last five years and significant reductions of 50% of the chronically homeless in our community.

ABCCM's homeless veterans programs create an additional level of success and cost-effectiveness that set us apart from our peers. First and foremost is our utilization of volunteers from the faith community. We create opportunities for volunteers to serve at every level from working at the front desk to welcome our veterans home, to working on cook teams and as servers to help provide three meals a day for the 250 men on our Veterans Restoration Quarters (VRQ) campus and the 45 women and children at Steadfast House. In addition, these volunteers offer 24 different training programs at the VRQ and 16 different personal skill-building training programs at Steadfast House.

Personal skill-building programs that equip our men and women to begin to manage every aspect of their daily lives include: sobriety and recovery through AA and NA groups; financial stability through banking and money management training; personal hygiene; health care training and spiritual formation through esteem-building, with the discovery of meaning and direction of one's place in the community; and work preparedness and job readiness training. From a practical standpoint, we rely on volunteers who have both experienced and overcome these challenges in their own lives.

We depend heavily on veteran service organizations such as The American Legion, The Military Officers Association, Disabled American Veterans, and Vietnam Veterans for Peace, to name a few. We have the first nationally chartered American Legion Post for homeless veterans (#526), which is now made up of 137 formerly homeless veterans located in our facilities and giving back to our community. Our volunteers create a culture of safety, encouragement, and respect that nourishes the body, mind, and soul.

The second key characteristic is developing a culture of personal responsibility in an incentive-based system instead of an entitlement-based system. We go out of our way to make sure that every veteran knows they are being "welcomed home." Operation Welcome Home is a serious

greeting. It is not unusual for a homeless veteran (man or woman) to respond to this outpouring of hospitality with skepticism and sarcastic remarks like: “Sure, and when do I have to be out?” Our response to them is always: “You are home now.” This culture of helping our veterans rediscover what a safe and secure place our community can be provides the ultimate level of respect. We build on this level of respect in order to help them rediscover healthy routines in their lives – routines of good personal hygiene and caring for one’s body by seeking appropriate primary care. We help them stabilize emotional and mental health by working with the Charles George VAMC to provide for their pharmacy and therapeutic needs.

A third key factor was aligning our success with the national trainings and best practices that are shared between providers and set by the GPD program. NCHV provides an invaluable function for service providers nationwide by bringing us together to share these best practices. I believe it was out of these conferences that VA homelessness staff were able to put together a set of characteristics to exemplify the best we can offer to our homeless veterans.

These characteristics include a campus-like environment to allow for housing, training, and recreational opportunities. This environment would be within a couple of miles of a VAMC to promote easy access to primary care, along with mental health, substance abuse, and PTSD services. The GPD program would work closely with DOL HVRP programs for education, and employment training and placement. Permanent supportive housing units connected to the property, or community collaboration in place, would give veterans priority and an immediate place to go. Ideally, the location would be away from the community’s known centers for illegal drug activities and more closely aligned with stable neighborhoods and the VAMCs.

In ABCCM’s case, we embraced these recommendations and were able to identify a location for our Veteran Restoration Quarters (VRQ) that met all these criteria. The VRQ is located within one mile of the Charles George VAMC. We have 10 acres and five buildings on the property, including a 6,000-square-foot education and training center. We also have HVRP and VWIP programs under the larger ABCCM umbrella, which offers concentrated education, job training, on-the-job training, apprenticeships, and job placement and follow-up for 18 months after placement.

ABCCM’s incentive model grew out of the great work done by the VA Grant and Per Diem leadership. I want to commend Roger Casey, Chelsea Watson, and their team for putting together an application process that is built on best-practice strategies in the country. I believe their application process with its core assumptions forms a great foundation for any GPD applicant to successfully grow their services for homeless veterans. I concur with NCHV in that the GPD program has faced the ultimate test by continuing to lower the number of homeless veterans during the worst economic crisis in our nation’s history. The GPD program needs to be sustained by Congress as one of the primary strategies in both the prevention and successful re-housing of our veterans.

A fourth key factor is found in our incentive system. A veteran earns points to acquire quality personal living items, along with a system of four steps that help our veterans’ progress. The first is called our Stabilization Phase, where a man or woman is able to develop healthy daily living routines, stabilize emotions, and take care of physical health needs. They are able to discover a

new sense of meaning and direction in their lives with proactive steps and support from peers and case managers. We perform routine room inspections along with laundry services so that their environment is clean and sanitary. Because of the support of our many congregations, we are able to provide personal hygiene kits, clothing, and other basic necessities. We offer congregate meals provided by 90 different cook teams who offer nutritious, balanced cuisines, thanks to the dietary support and planning from the Charles George VAMC staff.

Veterans are brought into this stabilization phase through ABCCM's outstanding outreach program. We have four Crisis Ministry centers that offer food, clothing, household items, and financial assistance, as well as two independent day shelter programs – one for men and one for women. ABCCM consistently has heard from our veterans that they trusted us because we did what we said; we cared for them before we knew they were veterans; and we offered an opportunity for personal growth and transformation through the integrity and success of other formerly homeless veterans and veteran volunteers in the community.

The second level is our Foundation Level, where men and women begin to live out and build on the personal skills they need. For those with mental health or substance abuse issues, this means developing emotion management skills, communication skills, and sobriety recovery skills. For those with physical health needs, it means tending to primary and specialty care, keeping appointments, medication management, and adopting a healthier lifestyle. We know that 51% of our veterans are diabetic, 26% deal with hypertension, and 12% deal with COPD. Having a full-time nurse on staff to monitor recovery for both inpatient and outpatient services, along with health and wellness service plans, is a key to our veterans' health stability.

Another foundational piece is honoring the faith perspective of each veteran by helping them engage in their own spiritual formation by participating with local congregations and faith groups of their choice. We offer holistic classes and experiences that help address esteem issues. We offer Bible studies to address spiritual issues in order to stabilize that deeper sense of hope, meaning, and purpose.

We lay another foundational piece by completing an assessment of their fundamental vocational goals and skills through a detailed work history. We offer to enhance their existing skills and experiences through work preparedness or job readiness training. The church and veterans groups, who volunteer with us, give resources for the basic necessities so that we can provide more of the GPD resources on education, training, and case management. When faith groups provide resources like food, clothes, household items, hygiene items, cleaning supplies, laundry supplies, plus vehicles from bicycles to cars and trucks, we can prioritize our funds by helping these men and women with the developmental skills they need to grow. As our veterans take steps to success, demonstrating that they will be responsible with their daily routines and activities, then we know they are ready to carry out their greater responsibilities for education, training, and employment.

During this phase of the program, we help our men and women embrace – and complete – old and new dreams through education and training, or by jumping back onto the career ladder. Putting these foundational pieces into place prepares them to move to the next level. At the Cornerstone Level, we start building on four cornerstones of their lives. The first cornerstone

utilizes traditional education classes, including secondary education, and campus classes. The veterans begin to embrace their potential.

Our veterans develop proficiencies by building on their personal skills and utilizing those skills to complete unfinished Bachelor's and Master's degree programs. Some re-enter the workforce through on-the-job training or apprenticeship programs. Some acquire or restore certification and licensure in their vocation, resulting in new directions and careers. We are successful in helping these men and women choose a career path where training, certifications, and degrees result in high-paying jobs. For example, in the field of health care, North Carolina offers a 14-month RN program for those with a Bachelor's degree, who can walk into a \$4,000/month job. We have internet technology (IT) jobs, where men and women can complete six months of certifications and go on to careers starting at \$5,000-\$7,000 per month. We have a 4-5 week truck driver's training program, which helps our men and women immediately start earning \$40,000-\$105,000 per year in the transportation industry.

We offer green collar job training in the area of solar technology, building analyst, LEED building design, and biofuel technicians – all careers that offer opportunities at a living wage and higher. We partner with our local community college, whose culinary arts and hospitality management programs are consistently ranked among the best in the country. Each year we graduate top chefs who go on to highly successful and lucrative careers in world-class facilities like the Grove Park Inn and the Biltmore Estate making \$15-20/hour. Having put two cornerstones of education and employment training in place, the veterans may also add/build on other cornerstones like a track record of sobriety and/or emotional stability. They may add the cornerstone of building a strong network of friends and co-workers, which prepares them for the next level.

Our veterans then move to the Pillar Level, where they exercise full autonomy and self-determination by embracing their own place in the community through income stability and permanent housing. In 2011, 76% were discharged into permanent housing and 90% of our men with disabilities were discharged into permanent supportive housing – compared to a national target of 60%. At the Pillar Level, we encourage these men and women to build sustainable success by their reintegration into four “families.”

The first is their civic family. The civic family is made up of other veteran support groups including The American Legion and DAV, or support groups such as AA, NA, etc. Some also participate in civic organizations such as Rotary and Kiwanis. These civic families become an important pillar to building strong social networks in their lives. The second family is their work family. We help our veterans understand that they are a part of the corporate team, instead of just punching a clock. We bring their employer onboard to help further the professional and personal growth of our men and women through their tutelage or on-the-job training. We have even seen situations where employers have been willing to turn over their business to a veteran when no other successor was in view. The third family is their family of faith. Our veteran men and women tell us that it is critical for them to engage with their own family of faith and with spiritually nurturing and developing persons. This becomes a part of their lifelong support system, which helps them grow their hope, as well as have a well-balanced perspective on life and their place in the community. Lastly is reunification with their biological family. Only about

one in four of our veterans are able reunite with their biological families due to the severe trauma of burned bridges. Many of these families have endured the worst, and all too often, these relationships prove to be beyond repair. On the other hand, in cases where reconciliation has been possible, the involvement of our veterans' biological families is frequently one of the most powerful components to predicting long-term sustainability in their lives. Encouraging our veterans to develop and establish new family ties is what we see most often that gives them that sense of completeness in their reintegration into the community.

The fifth key factor to our success is utilizing volunteers and incorporating businesses as key partners. Involvement of the faith community means getting our message out to key community leaders within those faith groups. Volunteers from the faith community are often the same ones who are making hiring decisions, education decisions, and offering advancement opportunities through their networks in the community.

Our faith community volunteers also open doors for training and employment in the community that would otherwise be closed. Our Chamber of Commerce and businesses in the community have already developed a "hire our veterans" culture. We have 111 businesses that actively give priority and preference to hiring veterans. We have 60 private landlords who are willing to offer permanent housing to our veterans. Our Public Housing Authority has adopted a policy of working with our homeless veterans, giving them first priority for open units, and is fully cooperating with our HUD-VA Supportive Housing (HUD-VASH) program.

Our faith community has also taken a lead with our Homelessness Prevention and Rapid Re-housing Programs (HPRP). ABCCM commits \$60,000 each year to homelessness prevention and rapid re-housing services, which hugely benefits our veterans. We have four crisis centers that provide access around the four corners of the county so that veterans and others can avoid homelessness. We have recently applied for funding through the VA Supportive Services for Veteran Families (SSVF) program and hope to add this to our list of program services.

We concur with NCHV's goals in an article published by John Driscoll on Feb. 8, 2012, in which he highlights the need to gear up for "The Critical Year." We are grateful to Congress and the President for the 2013 budget, which keeps America on track to end veteran homelessness by 2015. We hope you will continue to support the four key homeless veteran programs in the FY 2013 budget: GPD, SSVF, HUD-VASH, and HVRP.

A sixth key factor is prudent investment in a highly committed and professional staff, of which about half are veterans. We have great administrative leadership in Mr. Michael Reich. We also developed a Ph.D.-led substance abuse and recovery team of professionals along with a PTSD team of professionals. Having these professional competencies on staff helped us engage mental health professionals, support groups, and volunteers from the faith community and broader community to meet these core therapeutic needs of our men and women.

ABCCM offers these funding considerations:

1. A regular cost of living increase in the 2-3% range for the Grant and Per Diem Program in order to maintain quality services.

2. Consider continuing and expanding the DOL Veterans Workforce Investment Program (VWIP) in conjunction with SSVF. We support the planned expansions of SSVF, which will help serve a number of high-risk veterans and their families who are homeless with prevention and rapid re-housing services.
3. Support VA Medical Centers in creating stronger mental health services to address PTSD solutions for our veterans through creative public/private partnerships, such as that exhibited by the GPD program. We need additional funding for a number of successful treatment modalities for PTSD. We have discovered that most mental health and substance abuse issues tend to be symptomatic of the core PTSD underlying issues. In addressing these issues through various therapeutic modalities, we see tremendous transformational changes that allow men and women veterans to successfully cope with day-to-day living. These therapeutic modalities cover the waterfront of treatment from art and music, to equestrian and pet therapies, to traditional therapeutic programs. ABCCM and other GPD providers would welcome the opportunity to add a public/private partnership with VA to provide these therapeutic services in conjunction with resolving these core issues.
4. Reinstate the capital grant program for vans for the Grant and Per Diem program.
5. Consider creating a capital grant program for GPD programs to offer capital expansion and improvements. ABCCM's Grant and Per Diem programs need a boost of \$3 million to eliminate debt on the facilities. We would recommend that Congress consider a VA GPD Capital Challenge grant, incorporating matching funds, so that capital funds raised by the community would be matched one-to-one in order to help with efforts to both retire debt and/or improve/expand facilities.

In summary, several key factors contribute to our success:

1. Our strong collaboration with the Charles George VA Medical Center.
2. Our embrace of the principles set forth by the VA Grant and Per Diem program.
3. Our strong community collaboration around the Continuum of Care and the Ten Year Plan to End Homelessness, including the VA's Five Year Plan to End Homelessness among Veterans.
4. Our strong partnership with veteran service organizations. Over 200 members from various veteran service organizations volunteer and give back, the most important being the American Legion Post #526, which has 137 formerly homeless veterans giving back to our homeless veterans.
5. Our faith community. The faith community encompasses the 4,600+ volunteers who come alongside veterans at each critical phase as they progress through our program. By being rooted in the community, they give our veterans a way to be engaged in a new faith journey and spiritual development – on campus, as well as giving a spiritual home with networks of support off-campus in their congregation, synagogue, or mosque. This is essential to the veteran's reintegration into community.
6. Our incentive-based system, which counters the entitlement culture. While each of us are committed to honoring the brave sacrifice that our veterans have offered in sustaining the freedoms afforded in our country, we cannot let our charity and compassion become crippling instead of incentivizing and motivational. We encourage our veterans to recognize their accomplishments and let each step of their journey inspire them to continue along their path of restoration.
7. We recognize our veterans on a monthly and annual basis. We celebrate their numerous

accomplishments from simple certifications to taking on large community projects as community leaders.

We need government support from wise leaders who allow these services to engage the strengths of communities, with the freedom of innovation and support that is tailored to the needs of veterans. This should be coupled with responsible oversight and funding, which both empowers and equips.

We hope the Senate will continue to incentivize community- and faith-based organizations that can demonstrate they provide these services with outcomes that are more cost-effective and provide long-term solutions with a greater return on the public's investment.

We believe ABCCM is able to do this because of the value added not just by public/private partnerships and community-based partnerships, but also by faith-based partnerships. Bringing all aspects of the community to address mind, body, emotional, and spiritual components creates a comprehensive environment where our outcomes consistently outperform the national norms and our cost-effectiveness is multiplied by church and community support.

Our model produces success because it grows out of the microcosm of the community in which it is situated. It produces success because the microcosm of our community reflects shared values as well as shared opportunities, which come through the volunteer leaders of our community. ABCCM believes it has reflected the best of its community. We trust that government will reflect its best by continuing to adopt these principles and translate them into funding support, as well as policy supports that continue to sustain our common goal of ending homelessness for all our veterans by 2015.

I want to thank Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs and the National Coalition for Homeless Veterans for the opportunity to submit our practices and recommendations. It is an honor to serve our veterans in partnership with each of you. ABCCM will always be at your service, and we look forward to every opportunity to serve with you.