

Chairman Patty Murray

Opening Statement of Chairman Murray
Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee
Hearing on Ending Homelessness Among Veterans: VA's Progress on its 5 Year Plan
March 14, 2012

“Good morning everyone. And thank you all for joining us for this important hearing.

It goes without saying that no one who has sacrificed to serve our nation in uniform should ever be without a roof over their head. Yet, homelessness is a harsh reality for tens of thousands of veterans.

In 2009, Secretary Shinseki laid out the bold goal of ending homelessness among veterans in five years. As we reach the halfway point, today's hearing will examine the progress made to date, as well as the challenges and opportunities moving forward – particularly the challenges that homeless women veterans face.

As many in the room know, VA and the Department of Housing and Urban Development recently announced that the number of homeless veterans dropped by twelve percent, to a little more than 67,000. VA and HUD deserve to be commended for the significant progress they have made. But despite this progress, challenges remain.

VA must focus on a new and unfortunately growing segment of the homeless veteran population – female veterans. Like their male counterparts, women veterans face many of the same challenges that contribute to their risks of becoming homeless. They are serving on the front lines and being exposed to some of the same harshest realities of war. They are screening positive for PTSD, experiencing military sexual trauma, suffering from anxiety disorder, and having trouble finding a job that provides the stability to ease their transition home.

Yet when our female veterans find themselves homeless they have needs that are unique from those of male veterans. And as the VA's Inspector General found in a report released on Monday – some of those unique needs are not being addressed.

The IG found that there were serious safety and security concerns for homeless women veterans, especially those who have experienced military sexual trauma. They found: bedrooms and bathrooms without sufficient locks; halls and stairs without sufficient lighting; and mixed gender living facilities without access restrictions.

They also found that VA should do a better job at targeting places and populations that need help the most. And in addition to this IG report, GAO released a report at the end of last year that cited VA for the lack of gender-specific privacy, safety, and security standards. Following that report, I sent a letter to VA and HUD with Senators Tester and Snowe seeking answers to a number of questions it raised.

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I have heard from HUD that they are reviewing their data collection process in order to capture more information on homeless women veterans. I have also heard from VA that they are working to develop and provide training for staff and providers to better treat veterans who have experienced traumatic events and are modifying their guidance on privacy, safety and security for providers who serve homeless women veterans. As more women begin to transition home, and step back into lives as mothers, wives, and citizens, we must be prepared to serve the unique challenges they face. As we continue to learn about the alarming number of homeless women veterans, we must be sure that VA is there to meet their needs.

This means that we cannot violate their trust by jeopardizing their privacy, safety, or security when we place them in housing facilities or when they receive care in VA's facilities. I am hopeful that we can explore these issues together during today's hearing. And I am so pleased that courageous women like Sandra and Chanel have come forward to help give us a first-hand account of the challenges we need to meet.

As VA continues to make progress in bringing down the number of homeless veterans, challenges remain. We are still facing unacceptable numbers of chronically homeless veterans.

This group often has complex combinations of issues including addictions or mental and physical health issues. All have been failed by a system that let them slip through the cracks. And many of the traditional methods used for treating and caring for homeless veterans may not work for this population. That is why it is critical that we continue to look for productive ways to engage these veterans and get them off the streets. A strong partnership with VA's mental health programs will be crucial for this effort.

One of the best ways to end homelessness is to prevent it from occurring. This will take a concerted effort from VA's homeless programs. But it will also take collaboration from all of VA's programs. In today's economy, these programs provide critical assistance that helps veterans and their families remain in their homes.

It is also important that we continue to focus on getting earned benefits and services to veterans quickly and without delay. For homeless veterans and those at risk, these benefits can make the difference in avoiding homelessness or becoming trapped in a cycle that keeps them on the streets.

We have been making progress at ending veteran homelessness through investments in proven solutions like rapid rehousing and permanent housing programs. But we must ensure that we do not lose sight of the need to provide each homeless veteran with the resource that most closely matches their needs.

We also must ensure that VA's programs to help homeless veterans are running as efficiently as possible. I had my staff do an exhaustive review of thousands of pages worth of VA's inspections of its grant and per diem providers. My staff found that there were opportunities to improve the program by providing more guidance to providers and to VA staff who work with them.

Today's hearing gives us another opportunity to better understand the current situation with the goal of fixing what is not working and expanding what is. And now I would like to call on our Ranking Member, Senator Burr, for his opening statement."