

Rene Berthiaume, Vice President and General Manager, Network Enterprises

Thank you for the opportunity to testify before the Senate Veterans Affairs Committee.

I am Rene Berthiaume, Vice President of Network Enterprises, Inc., a non-profit community organization that provides employment and training opportunities for homeless veterans. I also serve as the Post Commander of the Vietnam Veterans Post 10583 of the Veterans of foreign Wars, as well as other veteran's organizations. In addition, I am a member of the Government Relations Committee of the Board of directors of the national coalition of Homeless Veterans headquartered in Washington D.C.

My main focus in serving our veterans is in the area of employment and training and long-term permanent affordable housing solutions. Our main source of funding for employment services to homeless veterans comes from the DOL-VETS-HVRP Program not from DVA. However it is important that these non-VA monies be maintained and expanded on as a way of leveraging other funding sources and is an important component of our overall strategy to End Veterans Homelessness by 2015, along with GPD, HUD-VASH as well as others. HVRP is very similar to Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) in that your primary function is to find the veteran a job. Under VA rules only a veteran with a service connected disability with a disability rating of 30% or more are eligible for VR services from the VA. Therefore, this DOL funding is meant to serve those veterans who are not eligible or choose not to go to VA for VR, a very large group.

We are reaching the halfway point in the Five Year Plan to end veterans' homelessness and we have made great strides towards that worthy goal. However, we are expecting a very large influx of new veterans in need of assistance due to our wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, therefore, much is still needed. The single most important thing we can do for these veterans is to assist them in finding a job. This is especially true for those who have not come to the point where they are considered 'chronic homeless' meaning severe mental health and substance abuse programs. Many of these veterans can avoid the trauma of sleeping in parks and under bridges if they could find a good paying job. We have in place 'Hire the Vet Program' under Title 38 that can help provide employment for veterans on government contracts. Title 38 can be hard to enforce and many companies do not comply.

Therefore, I am proposing new federal legislation that would allow up to a 5% preference for companies bidding on federal contracts if they commit to employing unemployed veterans for the duration of that contract. By preference I mean, a company's bid price could be up to 5% higher than the next bidder and still win the bid. As an example, if a company commits to hire one veteran they could receive a 1% preference; if they hire two veterans they could receive 2% preference and so on up to 5%. Even though it might seem that government would be paying more for the contract, it would actually save government resources by reducing the veterans' dependence on various public assistance programs, therefore making the veteran a taxpayer instead of a tax user.

I will limit my testimony at this time to putting forth this concept for consideration and would be glad to provide more detailed information as to how this program could be implemented. Thank

you again for allowing me to testify and I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.