

**STATEMENT OF
JEFF STEELE
ASSISTANT DIRECTOR
LEGISLATIVE DIVISION OF
THE AMERICAN LEGION
BEFORE THE
SENATE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
ON
"ENDING VETERAN HOMELESSNESS"

JULY 29, 2015**

At The American Legion's 2009 National Convention, then Secretary of Veterans Affairs Eric Shinseki laid out one of the most ambitious aspirational goals in the history of this nation's campaign to care for veterans. Not merely content to reduce the number of homeless veterans, Secretary Shinseki called for an end to veteran homelessness by 2015, completely eliminating the scourge. Shinseki told the crowd "No one who has served this nation should ever find themselves living without care – and without hope." By November of that year the Department of Veterans Affairs had rolled out their ambitious "Five Year Plan to End Homelessness Among Veterans."

In the midst of 2015, the target year, amazing strides have been made. According to last year's assessment, the numbers have dropped substantially. On a single night in January 49,933 veterans experienced homelessness.¹ That number is nearly 15 percent below the previous year, and a full 33 percent lower than statistics in 2010, and the numbers are going to drop lower.

While it remains possible, even probable, that from time to time there will be veterans who fall in and out of homelessness, a state where veteran homelessness achieves "functional zero", an equilibrium state where the number of veterans experiencing homelessness is no greater than the currently monthly housing placement rate for veterans, is still possible in the near future, provided we continue on the path VA has begun, and continue to utilize the resources of the entire community.

Chairman Isakson, Ranking Member Blumenthal and distinguished Members of the Committee, on behalf of Commander Helm and over two million members of The American Legion, we thank you and your colleagues for conducting this hearing and recognizing the importance of dealing with the struggles of homeless veterans.

The American Legion believes we can reach functional zero by continuing the path VA has embarked upon with their Five Year Plan, ensuring funding levels are not diminished as progress is being made, and by increasing the work done to build partnerships by all stakeholders in the community.

¹ VA 2014 Point-In-Time Count

VA's Five Year Plan:

VA developed a five-year plan to assist every homeless veteran willing to accept services retain or acquire: safe housing; needed treatment services; opportunities to retain or return to employment; and benefits assistance. Additionally, VA started a prevention initiative - the Supportive Services for Veterans and Families (SSVF) Program, which is designed to help veterans and their families rapidly exit homelessness, or avoid entering homelessness. SSVF is the only national, veteran-specific program designed to help at risk veterans avoid becoming homeless. The SSVF program provides grants to community-based non-profit organizations and is helping connect very low-income veterans and their families with services in the community.

This is a critical program because it focuses on “at risk” veterans, a cohort ten times the size of the actual homeless veteran population. This is critical because it has the ability to serve veterans *before* they are forced to the streets. The work of SSVF as a component of VA's Five Year Plan has been highly successful, ensuring the number of homeless veterans has continued to drop as homeless and at-risk veterans have been directed to housing solutions.

Maintaining the Funding:

Tremendous progress has been made in reducing the numbers of homeless veterans, but that progress could be lost if funding is reduced as the focus fades away from the mission at hand. One of the most critical tools has been the use of Housing and Urban Development – Veterans Affairs Supportive Housing (HUD-VASH) vouchers. Through FY 2015, HUD has awarded more than 78,000 HUD-VASH vouchers. Nationwide, more than 300 Public Housing Authorities (PHAs) have participated in the program. Recently, Congress created a set-aside pilot program to encourage HUD-VASH vouchers to be used on tribal lands, thereby filling an important gap in our service delivery system. It's essential that funding for these vouchers continue as VA continues its work to get veterans off the streets. The Grant and Per Diem Program (GPD) provides “Capital” and “Per Diem” grants and the Capital grants provide up to 65 percent of the costs to acquire, renovate and construct facilities for homeless veterans. These grants also see use for transportation needs, providing community vans and other aids to outreach functions.

The Homeless Veterans Reintegration Program (HVRP) within the Department of Labor's Veterans Employment and Training Services (DOL-VETS) addresses one of the challenges homeless veterans face – finding and maintaining gainful employment. This program requires relatively small investment, but potentially provides great dividends, by increasing the ability of homeless veterans to integrate back into society and provide meaningful impact in their communities. Although unemployment has fallen somewhat among veterans in recent years, it remains a concern. Keeping veterans in meaningful employment is a critical step towards keeping veterans off the streets.

Congress maintains the power of the purse, and therefore is critical to ensuring the success of these programs. The American Legion urges Congress to maintain the funding levels for these critical programs:

- **Continue to fund the Grant and Per Diem (GPD) Program at \$250 million and SSVF at no less than \$500 million through the maturity of the five-year plan (FY 2015)².**
- **Fund \$75 million in new HUD-VASH vouchers, while allocating more project-based vouchers to high concentration cities of chronically homeless veterans³.**
- **Fund the Homeless Veterans Reintegration Program (HVRP) within the Department of Labor's Veterans Employment and Training Services (DOL-VETS) at the authorized level of \$50 million -- current funding at \$38 million⁴.**

Build on Community Partnerships:

The American Legion has taken a leadership role within local communities by volunteering, fundraising, and advocating for programs and funding for homeless veterans. Additionally, The American Legion provides housing for homeless veterans and their families in some areas, such as the Departments of Connecticut and Pennsylvania. One of the goals of The American Legion is to help bring federal agencies, Non-Profit and Faith-Based organizations, and other stakeholders to the table to discuss best practices, along with funding opportunities, so homeless veterans and their families can obtain the necessary care and help in order for them to properly transition from the streets and/or shelters into gainful employment and/or independent living.

Sometimes, it doesn't take much. A local shelter for homeless veterans in Pittsburgh, PA noted that their entire budget for mattresses each year comes out of the small donations made by a local Post of The American Legion. This is not a large scale program with hundreds of thousands of dollars in operating costs. This is an example of how on a local level, even small donations can make a tremendous impact.

A delivery of \$5,000 in clothing and personal items in Shreveport, LA through The American Legion's Operation Comfort Warrior prompted a VA Occupational Therapist to note: *"Sometimes our veterans come in and don't have appropriate clothing to leave the hospital. They now have access to that appropriate clothing."*

Through thousands of small interactions in every community across the country, the stakeholders can build on each other's efforts. VA has done a tremendous job on a national level providing leadership, but much of the work at the local level will depend on the interaction of these community partnerships.

Due to our work with homeless veterans and their families, The American Legion understands that homeless veterans need a sustained coordinated effort that provides secure housing and nutritious meals; essential physical healthcare, substance abuse aftercare and mental health counseling; as well as personal development and empowerment. Veterans also need job assessment, training and placement assistance. The American Legion believes all programs to assist homeless veterans must focus on helping veterans reach their highest level of self-management.

² [Resolution No. 306](#) (AUG 2014)

³ [Resolution No. 330](#) (AUG 2014)

⁴ [Resolution No. 306](#) (AUG 2014)

Conclusion:

The American Legion strongly believes that Congress, VA and other stakeholders must continue to invest in the progress that has been made and remove any remaining barriers to housing for veterans. The VA's Five-Year Plan to eliminate veteran homelessness by 2015 is roughly 150+ days away. By helping to provide the necessary resources and changes to reach this obtainable, and worthy, goal, this nation can finally end the scourge of veteran homelessness.

The American Legion thanks this committee for their diligence and commitment to examining this critical issue facing veterans as they struggle to access care across the country. Questions concerning this testimony can be directed to The American Legion Legislative Division (202) 861-2700