

## Understand the Issues

To be an effective advocate for homeless veterans, you have to understand the reasons for homelessness and learn about the supportive services veterans need to regain an optimum level of self-reliance and productivity.

The following resources are available to help prepare you for your advocacy:

- NCHV website – Go to [www.nchv.org](http://www.nchv.org) for a wealth of information, including facts about homeless veterans, policies impacting the availability of services, organizations that help homeless veterans in your area, and assistance programs funded by federal agencies.
- Department of Housing and Urban Development – HUD has produced a guide on developing comprehensive care programs (Continuums of Care) for homeless veterans. Go to: [www.hud.gov/offices/cpd/homeless/library/coc/index.cfm](http://www.hud.gov/offices/cpd/homeless/library/coc/index.cfm).
- Department of Veterans Affairs – The VA website includes information about programs to assist homeless veterans, and contact information for Regional Homeless Services Coordinators. Go to [www.va.gov](http://www.va.gov).
- Homeless veteran service providers – A list of organizations in your area is available at [www.nchv.org](http://www.nchv.org). Click on “Service Provider Network.”

## Assess Services and Needs

Whether your efforts are to support established homeless veteran programs, to expand the services they provide, or to help develop new programs in underserved areas, you need to be familiar with existing programs and unmet needs in your community. People you should contact include:

- Homeless coordinator at each VA Medical Center. For contact information, go to [www.va.gov](http://www.va.gov), VHA, Homeless Programs.
- Homeless Coalitions for your state, city or county.
- Local Homeless Service Providers – Go to [www.nchv.org](http://www.nchv.org) and click on “Service Provider Network.”

- State homeless services coordinator (usually appointed by governor).
- State Director of Veterans Affairs – Look in the state government pages of your phone book.
- County Veteran Service Officers.
- Local law enforcement agencies.

These contacts will be important allies during your advocacy. Their guidance and counsel will help steer your efforts to where they are most needed, and their support will help ensure your success.

## Forums for Advocacy

Homelessness impacts every community in the nation. A full continuum of care – housing, employment training and placement, health care, substance abuse treatment, legal aid, and follow-up case management – depends on many organizations working together to provide services and adequate funding. The availability of homeless veteran services, and continued community and government support for them, depends on vigilant advocacy and public education efforts on the local, state and federal levels.

- Participate in local Homeless Coalitions – Most states, large cities and many urban counties have them, but if veteran advocates are not at the table, homeless veterans are less likely to receive a fair share of available resources. Remember, veterans account for 23% of the homeless population, and 33% of homeless men nationwide.
- Engage your state and local elected officials – Here is where the real power rests on public assistance issues. Most of the funding for homeless programs comes from federal “block grants” that are administered by the states. Local governments decide where that money is spent. Make homeless veterans a priority for state assemblies, mayors, county and city council members and commissioners. Testify at local planning and budget hearings. Strengthen your voice by soliciting the support of local care providers, the faith community, civic and veterans groups. Most importantly, follow up with

continuing correspondence and personal meetings with the local decision-makers.

- Involve the media – Local newspapers, TV and radio stations are always looking for news and issues to cover. Make sure they know who you are and what you are trying to accomplish. When they do express an interest, make sure they know it is appreciated and offer them the resources and support they need to cover your campaign well. Nothing impacts the deliberations and actions of public officials more than media attention.

## Take Your Message to Congress

Make sure your Senators and U.S. Representatives have the opportunity to be active partners in the campaign to end homelessness among veterans. Members of Congress and their staffs confront numerous issues every day and receive a tremendous amount of information. *They tend to act on the issues they perceive are important to their constituents.* Personal visits and letters from constituents will raise your concerns “above the noise” and help them realize this is an important issue among the voters they represent. Keep in mind, their influence is not only felt in Washington, D.C.; their support can have a significant impact on local initiatives.

- Make contact with staff members in your representatives’ district or state offices – Members of Congress rely heavily on their staff to keep them informed of important local issues. These are the people you will contact to arrange for visits with or request public appearances by your Senators and Representatives.
- Know your legislators – If you do not know who they are, contact your local Board of Elections. To learn about your U.S. Representative, visit [www.house.gov](http://www.house.gov) and click on “Members,” then type in your zip code. To learn about your Senators, visit [www.senate.gov](http://www.senate.gov) and click on “List Senators by State.” To view their voting records, go to <http://thomas.loc.gov> and click on “Roll Call Votes.”

- **Meeting with your legislator** – A personal meeting with your legislators, or their staff, is the opportunity to begin a dialogue that is critical to your effectiveness as an advocate.
  - If you are part of a group, keep it small, no more than 4 or 5 people.
  - Be on time, be polite, and be prepared to discuss how the issue impacts the entire community your legislator represents.
  - Keep your presentation focused, and leave time for discussion. Begin with points of agreement, and commend your legislator for positions with which you agree.
  - Be honest. If you don't know the answer to a question, tell them you will find out and get back to them. *Don't ruin your credibility with misinformation.*
  - Listen – Don't do all the talking. Your legislator may have concerns that you can address.
  - Be specific about what action you want your legislator to take, and present a brief fact sheet or position paper for later reference.
  - Follow your visit with a written thank you, whether or not they agreed with you. Maintaining contact and a positive dialogue is the best way to make sure your position is considered and respected.

### **Effective Communication ...**

Talking to your representatives in person or by telephone is the most effective way to communicate. When you call their offices, clearly identify yourself as a constituent and the matter you want to discuss. Be patient – their schedules and other issues will impact how quickly they can get back to you.

Letter writing is also an important lobbying tactic, along with visiting your elected officials, petition drives and obtaining media attention. However, because of tightened security, mail sent to Congress and federal agencies must now be screened, a time-consuming process. Call your representative's office and ask if you may send letters by fax or E-mail. As a professional courtesy, follow up by sending the original letter by regular post as soon as possible.

### **A few letter writing tips:**

- Write to Members of Congress at their Washington, D.C. offices. That is where their legislative staff works. Write to state officials at their state capital address during the legislative session, and their local offices at other times.
- Let your legislator know that you are a constituent. Legislators respond best to letters from voters in their districts. Include your home or organization's address.
- Get to the point. Make your case in a short, persuasive manner. If you are writing about specific legislation, include the bill name, number, and status.
- Tell your legislators what you want them to do (be specific).
- Request a response.
- Write to other key legislators besides your own; those on the committee considering the bill are particularly important.
- Address the letter properly (see next section).

### **Forms of address:**

#### **Address for state legislators:**

The Honorable \_\_\_\_\_  
 State Capitol  
 City, State Zip

#### **Address for Federal legislators:**

The Honorable \_\_\_\_\_  
 US House of Representatives *or* US Senate  
 Washington, D.C. 20515 (Representatives)  
 Washington, D.C. 20510 (Senate)

#### **Salutations:**

Dear Senator (or Representative or Governor) \_\_\_\_\_

### **Need More Information?...**

NCHV is your advocacy organization in Washington, D.C., and we are available to assist you. Please contact us if you need guidance on homeless veteran legislation.

# **How to Advocate for Homeless Veterans**



## **NATIONAL COALITION for HOMELESS VETERANS**

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