



NATIONAL COALITION *for* HOMELESS VETERANS

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TESTIMONY OF
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NATIONAL COALITION FOR HOMELESS VETERANS
BEFORE THE
ENVIRONMENTAL MATTERS COMMITTEE
MARYLAND HOUSE OF DELEGATES

February 20, 2013

Good afternoon Distinguished Delegates of the Committee. My name is Baylee Crone and I am representing the National Coalition for Homeless Veterans, the only national organization solely dedicated to ending and preventing homelessness among veterans. A trusted liaison for service providers and government partners at the local, state, and Federal level, NCHV provides resources and training to a network of more than 2,100 associate organizations working tirelessly over the past 22 years to help veterans move out of homelessness and into gainful employment, sustained housing, and independent living.

I am often asked why veterans experience homelessness. I respond that it depends on the individual circumstances and that each situation is unique when we are dealing with people, not just numbers. Many veterans struggle with obstacles common in most homeless populations: unemployment and underemployment, broken families, illness or disability. Veterans also struggle with barriers related more directly to their service, such as disabling conditions related to PTSD and brain injury that increase their likelihood of developing anxiety disorders, substance use disorders, or depression. They may struggle with a combination of these factors. Given the extensive list of possible barriers to independent living, assessing and meeting immediate needs becomes critical when planning appropriate interventions. At this time, the most pressing need is access to affordable housing.

When I say “access to affordable housing,” I mean access to both the continued financial supports that can stabilize a veteran and to the actual units available for low-income residents. The HUD-VA Supportive Housing Program (HUD-VASH) was developed to meet the first component of this goal, but success necessitates ensuring that affordable housing options are available to meet the housing needs of voucher holders.

HUD-VASH represents a collaborative, groundbreaking partnership between the Secretaries of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and Veterans Affairs (VA) where

a Housing Choice Voucher is paired with VA Medical Center case management. Through FY 2012, HUD has awarded more than 47,000 HUD-VASH vouchers. The President's FY 2013 Budget would fund an additional \$75 million in new HUD-VASH vouchers, bringing the total number of vouchers to more than 57,000.

Unfortunately, securing safe, affordable housing for veterans with HUD-VASH vouchers can be extremely difficult. The process of convincing some landlords to accept vouchers is so difficult that HUD now allows HUD-VASH voucher holders to sign leases that last less than 12 months and to continue their search for at least 120 days, twice as long as the usual 60 days, with the option of extension by the PHA. Veteran voucher holders who cannot find acceptable housing with a landlord willing to accept a HUD-VASH voucher must either accept housing in a less than optimal area or begin the daunting and discouraging process of seeking mobility through the PHA and the VA Medical Center to move to a new service area.

With intensified targeting of HUD-VASH vouchers for single veterans with dependent children, women veterans struggling with compounding disabilities, and chronically homeless veterans, the option of funneling these veterans into housing in unsafe areas solely because a landlord refuses to review their application because of their source of income is unacceptable. Source of income discrimination against a veteran holding a HUD-VASH voucher can potentially derail this entire process, which involves collaboration between multiple agencies at the Federal, state and local level, and can increase the possibility that the veteran will remain homeless.

Discrimination against holders of regular Housing Choice Vouchers adversely affects veterans, some of whom may not originally or no longer need intensive case management services from the VA through HUD-VASH, but who can still benefit greatly from the low-income housing support offered by the voucher and regular services through the VA Medical Center and community providers. Additionally, veteran spouses that divorce from the HUD-VASH voucher holder or veteran families that experience the death of a voucher-holding veteran will transition to a general Housing Choice voucher.

Expediting housing placement for homeless veterans with HUD-VASH and Housing Choice vouchers through legislating equal access makes economic sense. With the average annual cost of providing health care for homeless veterans approximately 13% higher than for veterans who are housed, supporting the process of HUD-VASH by alleviating discrimination based on source of income can save money when state and Federal budgets are already under incredible pressure to cut expenses.

These veterans are not broken. They are often injured, physically and emotionally, but are not beyond help if assistance is delivered with purpose. Access to affordable housing is a fundamental component of this healing process, allowing veterans to harness their skills and strengths to regain their role in the communities they served to protect. We are responsible for removing discrimination from the list of barriers they encounter on the pathway to securing affordable housing and reintegrating into their communities.