



Written testimony of the

NATIONAL COALITION
for **HOMELESS VETERANS**

United States Senate
Committee on Veterans' Affairs

“Hearing on Health and Benefits Legislation”

June 27, 2012

**Chairman Patty Murray, Ranking Member Richard Burr,
and distinguished members of the Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs:**

The National Coalition for Homeless Veterans (NCHV) is honored to submit this written testimony for the hearing on health and benefits legislation on June 27, 2012. NCHV represents more than 2,100 community- and faith-based organizations nationwide that serve veterans and their families in crisis. These organizations help our nation's most vulnerable heroes by providing health services, emergency and supportive housing, job training and placement assistance, legal aid, case management and other critical supports.

A few of the bills addressed at today's hearing would significantly impact the ability of service providers to deliver the needed care to help homeless and at-risk veterans achieve or maintain independent living:

- S. 1806, Sen. Barbara Boxer's bill to amend the Internal Revenue Code of 1986 to allow taxpayers to designate overpayments of tax contributions to the homeless veterans assistance fund
- S. 3049, Sen. Mark Begich's bill to expand the definition of homeless veteran for purposes of benefits under the laws administered by the Secretary of Veterans Affairs
- S. 3309, Sen. Patty Murray's "Homeless Veterans Assistance Improvement Act of 2012"

NCHV supports each of these measures. We offer a few targeted recommendations to improve upon S. 3309, however.

S. 1806, a bill to amend the Internal Revenue Code of 1986 to allow taxpayers to designate overpayments of tax contributions to the Homeless Veterans Assistance Fund

Limited federal funds for homeless veteran assistance are often concentrated in heavily populated areas. A significant number of community- and faith-based service providers lie outside of major metropolitan areas, which makes it more difficult to compete for federal grants. However, the homeless and at-risk veterans served by these organizations require the same help to reintegrate into society as those in larger urban areas.

This bill would establish the Homeless Veterans Assistance Fund, which would supplement proven federal programs and could be authorized to target nontraditional, or "nonconforming entities," and support high-demand activities such as:

- Child care assistance for single veterans in employment assistance programs
- Transportation assistance to medical and employment services
- Security deposits and utility hook-up fees for housing placements
- Clothing, uniforms and tools for employment

The U.S. General Accounting Office has reported that American taxpayers may have overpaid as much as \$945 million, based on data from tax year 1998. This amounts to an average overpayment of \$438 per taxpayer ("Tax Deductions," March 2002). Tax overpayments may be inevitable, but they do not need to be meaningless. The simple act of checking a box, as authorized by this bill, would enable taxpayers to contribute all or part of their overpayments to help prevent and end homelessness for those who have served this country in a way increasingly few Americans ever will.

S. 3049, a bill to amend title 39, United States Code, to expand the definition of homeless veteran for purposes of benefits under the laws administered by the Secretary of Veterans Affairs

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) currently defines “homeless veteran” based on an incomplete citation of the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act (42 U.S.C. 11302 (a)). The full definition of “homeless” under this act includes the following:

“Any individual or family who is fleeing, or is attempting to flee, domestic violence, dating violence, sexual assault, stalking, or other dangerous or life-threatening conditions in the individual’s or family’s current housing situation, including where the health and safety of children are jeopardized, and who have no other residence and lack the resources or support networks to obtain other permanent housing.”

Sen. Begich’s bill serves a single purpose: to include this provision in VA’s definition of “homeless veteran.” Although some of these veterans may already qualify for VA homeless assistance due to the nature of their circumstances, we must make certain that we do not deny these vulnerable families the help that they need.

S. 3309, “Homeless Veterans Assistance Improvement Act of 2012”

Sec. 2. Requirement that recipients of grants from Department of Veterans Affairs for comprehensive service programs for homeless veterans meet physical privacy, safety, and security needs of such veterans.

Earlier this year, the VA Office of Inspector General reported “serious female veteran safety, security, and privacy issues” at certain Grant and Per Diem (GPD) Program sites (“Audit of the Homeless Providers Grant and Per Diem Program,” March 2012). Sec. 2 of this bill would help to remove any ambiguity over the need for grantees to fully address these issues in the grant application process.

Sec. 3. Modification of authority of Department of Veteran Affairs to provide capital improvement grants for comprehensive service programs that assist homeless veterans.

Successful GPD providers who have previously received Capital Grants to establish their programs should have the opportunity to compete for funding to maintain those program facilities, including making the necessary renovations to serve homeless women veterans. Sec. 3 of this bill would give the VA Secretary the discretion to make these grants.

Sec. 4. Funding for furnishing legal services to very low-income veteran families in permanent housing.

Outstanding warrants can present a barrier to independent housing for veterans and their families. Dozens of communities around the country have responded to this issue by adopting veteran-specific court programs. One such example is the Homeless Court Program (HCP) – a collaboration between veteran service providers and local court systems in which a veteran’s participation in a rehabilitative program can be considered “payment” for various misdemeanor offenses.

Sec. 4 of this bill would set aside at least 1.0 percent of SSVF Program funding for providers that will provide “legal services to assist the veteran family with issues that interfere with the family’s

ability to obtain or retain housing or supportive services.” NCHV recommends that this funding be targeted to communities that have demonstrated both a commitment and an ability to resolve veterans’ legal issues. This could be accomplished by restricting these funds to communities with established Veterans Court programs.

Sec. 5. Modifications to requirements relating to per diem payments for services furnished to homeless veterans.

The Grant and Per Diem Program currently lacks authority to directly serve veterans’ dependent children. Under the current authorization, veteran families are either forced to split up or be denied entry into the program.

With the introduction and rapid expansion of the SSVF Program, VA has recognized that homelessness cannot be effectively ended and prevented without caring for the veteran family as a whole. This same philosophy should apply to the GPD Program.

Sec. 5 of this bill would allow veterans’ dependents to directly receive services through the program. Additionally, under this section the VA Secretary would be required to make per diem payments to “nonconforming entities,” such as those discussed earlier in this testimony (regarding S. 1806). The Secretary is already authorized to make these payments. A mandate would potentially benefit underserved communities, but it should not be applied if it will compromise the integrity of the highly competitive GPD Program.

Sec. 6. Authorization of grants by Department of Veterans Affairs to centers that provide services to homeless veterans for operational expenses.

Drop-in service centers are an important element of the GPD Program. They provide essential services and referrals to homeless and at-risk veterans who may not yet be ready or willing to enter into a residential therapy program, or are unable to because of capacity limitations. Yet with a reimbursement rate of no more than \$4.86 per hour per veteran accessing the service center, few grantees can afford to maintain full-time staff for this purpose.

The operational grants allowed by Sec. 6 of this bill would help support established service centers. NCHV recommends this provision clearly identify staffing expense as an allowable operational cost.

Sec. 7. Expansion of Department of Veterans Affairs authority to provide dental care to homeless veterans.

VA dental care for homeless veterans is a limited resource and does not reach enough of the homeless veteran community. For many of these men and women veterans, their job prospects and self-esteem suffer until they are able to address such issues as severe oral pain and missing teeth. The department’s dental program helps them alleviate these barriers.

Veterans who live in housing units supported by HUD-VASH vouchers, meanwhile, have an enormous advantage over the homeless veteran population at large: stable housing with regular case management and counseling supports. Given these considerations, NCHV does not endorse Sec. 7 of this bill, which would expand eligibility for VA’s homeless veteran dental care to a non-homeless population: HUD-VASH voucher holders.

Sec.8. Extensions of authorities and programs affecting homeless veterans.

This section would impact nearly every major homeless veteran program in the federal government. Among the critical FY 2013 reauthorizations included in this section are:

- \$250 million for the Grant and Per Diem Program
- \$300 million for the Supportive Services for Veteran Families Program
- \$50 million for the Homeless Veterans Reintegration Program (HVRP), the nation's only employment program wholly dedicated to serving homeless veterans

The GPD Program represents one of six pillars in the VA Secretary's Five-Year Plan to End Veteran Homelessness: community partnerships. Its role in ending veteran homelessness should not be diminished. Therefore, NCHV is concerned that Sec. 8 of this bill would scale back the program's authorization to \$150 million well before the maturity of the Five-Year Plan in 2015. We recommend that the program's authorization be sustained at the \$250 million level.

Additionally, while this section would reauthorize the Special Needs Grant Program through 2015, NCHV maintains that the current authorization level of \$5 million is insufficient to meet the needs of the program's target populations— particularly veterans with dependent children. We recommend that the program's authorization should be at least 15 percent of the total authorization for section 2011, title 38, U.S. Code. This would help to ensure that the necessary capital funding is available to provide safe, private and secure facilities for homeless women veterans and single homeless veterans with dependent children.

In Summation

NCHV has been at the center of the campaign to end veteran homelessness since 1990, and knows better than most the role that the Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs has played in bringing our nation to within reach of the goal of ending veteran homelessness. With passage of this legislation, this Committee will build upon its rich bipartisan legacy of leadership in providing assistance that is responsive to the needs of an evolving veteran population.

We greatly appreciate the opportunity to submit this written testimony on behalf of our nation's homeless veteran service providers, and look forward to working with this Committee to help advance S. 1806, S. 3049, and S. 3309 – with the above recommendations – to the full Senate.

Respectfully,

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