



Testimony of the

NATIONAL COALITION
for **HOMELESS VETERANS**

United States Senate
Committee on Veterans' Affairs

Hearing on Pending Health Care Legislation

May 9, 2013

Chairman Bernie Sanders, Ranking Member Richard Burr, and distinguished members of the Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs:

I am honored to appear before this Committee as the policy director of the National Coalition for Homeless Veterans (NCHV). On behalf of the 2,100 community- and faith-based organizations NCHV represents, we thank you for your steadfast commitment to serving our nation's most vulnerable heroes.

This testimony will focus on our support for three bills currently before this Committee:

- S. 62, the "Check the Box for Homeless Veterans Act of 2013";
- S. 287, a bill "to expand the definition of homeless veteran for purposes of benefits under the laws administered by the Secretary of Veterans Affairs"; and
- S. 825, the "Homeless Veterans Prevention Act of 2013."

Additionally, this testimony will recommend ways to improve effective service delivery to homeless veterans.

Background

For decades, the veteran service provider community represented by NCHV has worked arduously toward the goal of ending veteran homelessness. The announcement of Secretary of Veterans Affairs Eric Shinseki's Five-Year Plan to End Veteran Homelessness in November 2009 – fully incorporated into the "Federal Strategic Plan to Prevent and End Homelessness" – demonstrated the federal government's solidarity in making that goal a reality.

Congress has seen the promise of this plan and, through fiscal year (FY) 2013, has increased funding for successful community-based programs to end veteran homelessness. These investments have fueled consistent decreases in the number of homeless veterans on a given night – down 17.2% since 2009, according to the latest Point-in-Time Report from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD).

As the maturity date of the Five-Year Plan approaches, NCHV maintains that our nation is on a path to ensure that no veterans, regardless of their personal haunts and challenges, are ever left to fend for themselves on the streets.

The legislation currently before this Committee would help keep our nation on this path.

S. 62, "Check the Box for Homeless Veterans Act of 2013"

Since their inception, federal assistance programs for homeless veterans have received overwhelming bipartisan support from Congress. While critical, some of these investments have been modest in consideration of the full range of problems associated with veteran homelessness.

Sen. Barbara Boxer's S. 62 would help address some of the shortfalls by establishing a national Homeless Veterans Assistance Fund, supported through designated tax overpayments and other direct contributions. The fund would be used for two purposes:

1. To develop and implement new and innovative strategies to prevent and end veteran homelessness; and

2. To provide services through any homeless veteran program administered by the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), the Department of Labor-Veterans' Employment and Training Service (DOL-VETS), and HUD.

This fund's primary purpose should be to help close gaps in service delivery systems for veterans. It would be counterproductive to reduce appropriations for homeless veteran assistance programs simply due to this fund's establishment.

The Homeless Veterans Assistance Fund should help organizations that cannot compete for federal grants under limited programs – such as those in highly rural areas – provide support to veterans in crisis. The fund should also support nontraditional, high-demand activities such as:

- Contracting with veteran service providers to administer case management for veterans in permanent supportive housing in underserved communities.
- Providing child care assistance for veterans in employment assistance programs.
- Helping veterans make security deposits and pay utility hook-up fees for housing placements.

All of the above activities are already authorized in some form. By focusing on these areas of service delivery, S. 62 would serve a vital role in both eliminating and preventing veteran homelessness.

S. 287, a bill “to expand the definition of homeless veteran for purposes of benefits under the laws administered by the Secretary of Veterans Affairs”

Over the past few years, VA's homeless programs – such as the Supportive Services for Veteran Families (SSVF) and HUD-VA Supportive Housing (HUD-VASH) Programs – have evolved to accommodate the growing number of homeless women veterans and single veterans with dependent children. Unfortunately, the department still 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 provision:

“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. Mark Begich's S. 287 serves a straightforward purpose: to include this provision in VA's definition of “homeless veteran.”

Although some veterans who meet this expanded definition may already qualify for VA homeless assistance due to the nature of their circumstances, we must ensure that we do not deny any of these veteran families the help that they need.

S. 825, “Homeless Veterans Prevention Act of 2013”

The breadth of this bill is a testament to this Committee's leadership in the effort to prevent and end veteran homelessness. Introduced by Chairman Bernie Sanders and Ranking Member Richard Burr, S. 825 would – among many important provisions – reauthorize competitive grant programs for community- and faith-based veteran service providers. These programs include the

Grant and Per Diem (GPD) Program, Homeless Veterans' Reintegration Program (HVRP), and SSVF Program. Along with the continued buildup of the HUD-VASH Program, expansion of these programs has contributed to the steady reduction in veteran homelessness over recent years.

NCHV concurs with VA in its FY 2014 Budget Proposal on the following items, which are not reflected in this legislation:

- The GPD Program should be permanently authorized at \$250 million. As currently written, S. 825 would allow the program's authorization to drop to \$150 million after FY 2014.
- The SSVF Program should be permanently authorized at \$300 million. As currently written, S. 825 would allow the program's authority to expire after FY 2014. This program will serve as the foundation of VA's strategy to prevent veteran homelessness well beyond 2015, and its permanent authorization is critical to sustain the national priority to end veteran homelessness.
- The grant program for homeless veterans with special needs should be permanently authorized. As currently written, S. 825 would allow the program's authority to expire after FY 2014.

Therefore, NCHV recommends that S. 825 be amended to accommodate these proposals. Without these extensions, the Department of Veterans Affairs cannot adequately plan for these programs' future.

Additionally, while this bill would provide increased per diem payments for service providers implementing a "Transition in Place" housing model, the need to reform the per diem payment method remains. This Committee helped pass legislation that became Public Law 112-154, which requires VA to:

"Complete a study of all matters relating to the method used by the Secretary to make per diem payments under section 2012(a) of title 38, United States Code, including changes anticipated by the Secretary in the cost of furnishing services to homeless veterans and accounting for costs of providing such services in various geographic areas."

The law requires VA to report to Congress on its findings no later Aug. 6, 2013. Anything less than a proposal to thoroughly modernize this outdated reimbursement policy – from a flat per diem rate to a flexible, cost-of-services payment method – should be deemed insufficient.

In Summation

Thank you for the opportunity to present this testimony for today's hearing. It is a privilege to work with the Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs to ensure that every veteran in crisis has reasonable access to the support services they have earned through their service to our country.

Matt Gornick
NCHV Policy Director

National Coalition for Homeless Veterans
333 ½ Pennsylvania Avenue SE
Washington, DC 20003
202-546-1969

NCHV Disclosure of Federal Grants

Grantor: U.S. Department of Labor
Subagency: Veterans' Employment and Training Service
Grant/contract amount: \$350,000
Performance period: 8/13/2012 - 8/12/2013
Indirect costs limitations or
CAP limitations: 20% total award
Grant/contract award notice
provided as part of proposal: Yes

Grantor: U.S. Department of Labor
Subagency: Veterans' Employment and Training Service
Grant/contract amount: \$350,000
Performance period: 8/13/2011 - 8/12/2012
Indirect costs limitations or
CAP limitations: 20% total award
Grant/contract award notice
provided as part of proposal: Yes