

Policy and Legislative Update: Appropriations and the Annual Conference

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Homeless Veteran Assistance Programs and the Appropriations Process: House of Representatives

At the time of writing, the House of Representatives has passed two of the three relevant appropriations bills pertaining to veteran homelessness relief efforts in Fiscal Year 2016.

Unfortunately, the two appropriations bills moved by the House reflect the numbers set forth in the President's Budget request. These two bills – Military Construction/VA Appropriations, and Transportation/HUD Appropriations - dictate the level of funding that Grant and Per Diem (GPD), Supportive Services for Veteran Families (SSVF), and HUD-VA Supportive Housing (HUD-VASH) all receive.

Due to the low funding request made by the Administration, the numbers proposed in the two appropriations bills are: \$201 million for GPD, \$300 million for SSVF, and \$0 for new HUD-VASH vouchers. These levels of funding, if approved in the Senate, would realize a cut of \$49 million from the GPD program and a reversal of a \$75 million investment in the SSVF program.

The third appropriations bill of note, the Labor, HHS, and Education Appropriations bill, governs the funding level for the Homeless Veteran Reintegration Program (HVRP). This bill, while still in committee draft form, would appropriate \$38.109 million for HVRP. This would be another flat funding of the HVRP program.

Homeless Veteran Assistance Programs and the Appropriations Process: Senate

The three bills in the Senate are still in their subcommittees, and have to be approved by the Senate Appropriations Committee before going to the floor for a vote by the entire Senate, but will form the firm basis for any Senate action. They represent the Senate's deep commitment to ending veteran homelessness, and contain money for programs that were overlooked in the House appropriations work and in the President's Budget request.

The Transportation/Housing and Urban Development appropriation bill in the Senate would provide an additional \$75 million for new HUD-VASH vouchers in FY 2016. This equates to roughly an additional 10,000 vouchers, and is equal to the build-out we have seen annually for the past few years. This bill also includes \$5.7 million to fund a new program to rehabilitate or modify the housing of disabled and low-income veterans, a much needed resource to help veterans stay in their homes.

It should be noted that both of these call-outs to veterans were made under the leadership of Subcommittee Chairwoman Susan Collins (R-ME). She had expressed concern at the lack of HUD-VASH vouchers in the President's Budget as far back as January of this year, and has been a committed advocate for their inclusion in the appropriation bill. Senator Collins was the recipient of the "NCHV Public Policy Award" at this year's Annual Conference, and was chosen for her past commitment to veterans' issues. It is clear from her recent leadership that she continues to demonstrate great commitment to the cause.

The Military Construction and Veterans Affairs appropriation bill governs the funding of the SSVF and GPD programs, among the many other Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) funded homelessness programs. In the Senate version, the committee report directs the Secretary of the VA to "fund both of the programs at the fully authorized level". If retained through the Senate voting process and the negotiations with the House, this direction may prevent the cuts to these two programs that the President's Budget request called for.

NCHV commends the work of the Senate Appropriations Committee and its relevant subcommittees, and urges that the bills be adopted, and that these provisions be priorities in the negotiation process with the House.

The Public Policy Session at the Annual Conference

I would like to take a moment to thank all of the attendees to this year's Policy Session at the NCHV Annual Conference. This year we expanded the scope of the session to include new topics and different types of speakers than we have traditionally included, and we were gratified that many of you expressed your satisfaction with this change. For those of you who were not able to make it to the Conference, or who were next door at the NCHV Founder's Forum at the time, here is a run-down of what you missed.

This year the Session was divided in two; for the first two hours, NCHV staff, NCHV leadership, and the NCHV Board discussed our organization, legislation, and our membership. The second block of two hours was set aside to allow representatives from the leadership of the U.S. Departments of Labor, Housing and Urban Development, and Veterans Affairs to discuss their departments' own policy changes, priorities, and to take questions from the attendees.

During the NCHV portion of the Session, we discussed the appropriations process, and relevant legislation moving through Congress, as well as a new advocacy campaign that we are developing. If you missed the session and would like to discuss any of this material, please feel free to email me at jstewart@nchv.org or call the NCHV office at (202)546.1969.

The new advocacy campaign was introduced in this space last month as well as at the Annual Conference, and can be best summed up with the phrase "better collaboration with members." In its advocacy work on Capitol Hill, NCHV will be reaching out to work more closely with members to educate their US Representatives and US Senators on issues that impact homeless and at-risk veterans, as well as service providers and Continuums of Care.

To that end, at the Policy Session, NCHV staff distributed surveys to the attendees that sought to identify partners in this work. These would be organizations and individuals we knew wanted to be contacted about working in partnership with NCHV on national initiatives. We were very pleased by the range and number of responses we received. But we know that not all of our potential partners were represented at the Policy Session. If you or your organization would be interested in working alongside NCHV on advocacy and education to the US Congress, please contact me via the information above.

Before I close, I also wanted to thank those of you who approached me at the Conference, and those of you who filled out our advocacy contact forms. NCHV is looking forward to working with you more closely in the coming months to advance the interests of homeless and at-risk veterans on Capitol Hill.