

Policy and Legislative Update: The Second Session of the 114th Congress

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Appropriations Wrap-Up for Fiscal Year 2016

Finally, on December 18, 2015, President Obama signed into law the “Consolidated Appropriations Act,” which provided the funding for all discretionary government programs for our current fiscal year. NCHV is relieved to say that after a year of difficulty and uncertainty in our field, we were able to prevent any cuts to the veteran homelessness program continuum, and were even able to secure a modest increase.

Despite an administration-proposed cut of \$49 million to the Grant and Per Diem (GPD) program, NCHV was able to convince Congress to fully fund that program this fiscal year. An appropriation of \$250 million was made for the GPD program, a flat funding from the previous year.

The Supportive Services for Veteran Families (SSVF) program likewise received a flat funding from its previous year, at \$300 million for this fiscal year. This is below the level that NCHV believes is necessary to maintain the program’s success, and we will be pushing for an increased appropriation going forward.

The Department of Labor’s Homeless Veteran Reintegration Program (HVRP) received a flat funding of \$38.109 million. This will allow the program to continue serving communities at the same level as previous years. NCHV is committed to raising the funding level of the HVRP, and has made that a high priority going forward this year. HVRP is the only community grant program in the homeless veteran continuum that has not seen an increase in funding during the Five-Year Plan.

The HUD-VASH program has received an increase of \$60 million above its current funding level. This will pay for about 8,000 housing vouchers from the Department of Housing and Urban Development side. There have been no commensurate increases on the Department of Veteran Affairs side, leaving these vouchers without supportive services dollars in the immediate future. NCHV is committed to creating those dollars through the VA, but also in helping local communities get creative with funding sources. NCHV is also committed to encouraging the project basing of many of these 8,000 vouchers.

The important protections of the GPD program, and the increase in HUD-VASH vouchers are both due to the passionate advocacy of members of Congress. In addition to the committed experts (both Members and staff) on all the appropriation committees, several individuals stand out for the thanks of our field.

Senator Susan Collins (R-ME) was a vocal and dedicated proponent of HUD-VASH from the moment the President’s budget request was published, and her position on the committee made all the difference in the lives of 8,000 chronically homeless veterans.

The eventual reversal of the proposed GPD cuts began gaining traction in the Senate because of the unwavering support of Senator Mazie Hirono (D-HI). Sen. Hirono, along with Senator Mike Crapo (R-ID), wrote a letter expressing strong support for the full funding of the GPD program to the Senate Appropriations Committee. The letter was signed by 15 U.S. Senators, and made all the difference in reversing the proposed GPD cuts. Senators Hirono (D-HI), and Crapo (R-ID), as well as Wicker (R-MI), Blumenthal (D-CT), Schumer (D-NY), Gillibrand (D-NY), Wyden (D-OR), Heller (R-NV), Brown (D-OH), King (I-ME), Reed (D-RI), Murphy (D-CT), Peters (D-MI), Franken (D-MN), and Sanders (I-VT) all signed the letter. Their support was invaluable.

The New Year and the New Session of Congress

With the New Year comes the Second Session of the 114th Congress. NCHV has a number of legislative priorities to accomplish before the end of the year and the biannual wiping-out of bills that comes with congressional turnover. Of course these priorities involve the yearly appropriations process, but also include large scale revisions to the GPD program, and achieving passage of two significant veteran homelessness bills in the Senate.

The Grant and Per Diem program has remained fundamentally unchanged for nearly 25 years. However, a number of problems have long existed with the structure of the program. Most of these problems can be traced back to the funding structure – namely, the “Per Diem” in GPD. NCHV believes that since the advent of the SSVF program, VA has demonstrated that it has the ability to competently administer true grant programs. NCHV will be advocating for a move to this funding structure for the GPD program to solve the myriad of small problems that providers face, and also to open up the creative use of existing GPD stock in communities across the country. We believe that GPD’s are a crucial part of the continuum and that it is imperative to keep this resource active. GPD’s have decades of experience with the fight against veteran homelessness that cannot be lost.

Two bills already exist in the Senate that must be passed by the end of this year. They are the “Homeless Veterans Prevention Act” (S.684) and the “Veteran Housing Stability Act” (S.1885). Both bills are wish-lists of the provider community, tackling such issues as legal services, dental care, follow-up care to GPD graduates, easing the voluntary exit of providers from the GPD program, increased SSVF spending levels, and the permanent authorization of the National Center for Homelessness Among Veterans. NCHV will be advocating for the combining of both of these bills into a larger veteran homelessness assistance package, to be passed before the end of the calendar year.

The NCHV Advocacy Team now includes dozens of providers, housing authorities, and continuums of care, but we can always use more! If you and your organization are interested in being contacted by NCHV to help move national legislation, please write to jstewart@nchv.org or call the NCHV office at (202)-546-1969. Anyone interested in helping with our work on OTH eligibility, funding levels, or any of the other myriad of issues that NCHV advocates for on a daily basis, please reach out to us. Every one of you are experts, and are perfectly positioned to help your Congressman or Senators make the right decision when it comes to ending veteran homelessness. I look forward to hearing from you!