



NATIONAL COALITION *for* HOMELESS VETERANS

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Policy and Legislative Update: First to Second Session of 113th Congress

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With the start of the New Year comes a new session of the 113th Congress. This is a good time to take stock of what has been accomplished in the past year, and identify goals for the year to come. All in all, NCHV and the entire community have had a successful 2013.

The recent release of the Annual Homeless Assessment Report has indicated the declining trend of veteran homelessness has continued, dropping to 57,849 individuals from the previous year's 62,619. On Capitol Hill, and in the face of legislative recalcitrance, funding levels have remained stable or increased, and important changes to programs are in the works. As we enter the New Year it will be increasingly important to look to, and beyond, the end of the Five-Year Plan to End Veteran Homelessness by 2015 in order to continue to be effective advocates for the hard-won victories that your important work has managed to achieve.

The Close of the 1st Session of the 113th Congress

Despite the budgetary conflicts that have crippled much of the legislative process, and even temporarily shut down the federal government, Congress has remained committed to the Five-Year Plan. Funding has remained stable across the spectrum of homeless veteran assistance programs, and may even increase in places. Budgetary authorization for all of our programs administered by the Departments of Veterans Affairs (VA), Labor (DOL), and Housing and Urban Development (HUD) have been extended through Fiscal Year 2014 at their current levels.

On December 11, 2013, the House passed a Joint Resolution providing for Fiscal Year 2014. The following levels of funding have been provided for in this bill. At press time, the Senate had yet to approve the bill, but it was expected to pass.

- Grant and Per Diem (GPD): \$235 million.
- Supportive Services for very-low income Veteran Families (SSVF): \$300 million.
- Homeless Veterans Reintegration Program (HVRP): \$38.185 million.
- HUD-VA Supportive Housing (HUD-VASH): \$75 million.

All of these levels of funding are stable from last year. The HUD-VASH appropriation will fund about an additional 10,000 vouchers this year, as this money is incremental. It is possible that if a further Military Construction and Veterans Affairs appropriations bill is passed, then the appropriations for the GPD program will increase to \$250 million for FY 2014.

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Of course, the budgetary difficulties are made more acute because of sequestration. Despite some mechanical changes to the way funding is cut, the majority of homeless veteran assistance programs have retained their immunity to those cuts. The health programs based at VA cannot be reduced because of sequestration; this leaves only HVRP in jeopardy. Because it is administered by DOL, HVRP has been, and will continue to be, subject to sequestration. It loses about \$2 million a year from these cuts.

Carry-Over from 1st to 2nd Session

Several important pieces of legislation were still in the works at the end of the 1st session, and NCHV will be working to make sure they are taken up again this year.

The first is a bill which would ensure that veterans benefitting from the HUD-VASH program as part of the Rapid Re-housing paradigm be able to enroll in HVRP jobs training. Currently, by being rapidly re-housed, the veteran loses his or her homeless “status” and is ineligible to receive the benefits of HVRP. NCHV believes that “Housing First” should never mean “Housing Only.”

The second bill that is in the legislative process would augment our efforts to end veteran homelessness in several ways. It would extend the budgetary authorization for HVRP through Fiscal Year 2018, removing uncertainty on the part of grantees about continued funding. The bill would also extend Servicemembers Civil Relief Act protections against foreclosure to several groups for a period of one year. NCHV believes that by providing this one-year protection to some of the most at-risk and vulnerable populations, we can prevent instances of homelessness for veterans and their families facing housing transitions. This bill, which originated in the House of Representatives, passed through that chamber by voice vote – a welcome display of bipartisan support for homeless veterans.

The final bill of consequence would greatly bolster the community’s efforts to end homelessness among veterans, and would fill many of the service gaps that our members identified in a survey taken at the NCHV Annual Conference in May 2013. This bill passed the Senate with unanimous consent and has been sent to the House. Some of the provisions include:

- Expanding the definition of a homeless veteran to include those fleeing domestic violence
- Increasing Per Diem payments for transitional housing beds
- Allowing Per Diem payments for the dependent children of homeless veterans
- Providing for the dental care of homeless veterans enrolled in all of our programs
- Supporting legal services for homeless veterans

These bills would greatly promote the capacity of this community to serve those veterans who are still homeless. NCHV fully supports the efforts of the legislators who sponsored these bills, and of those who support them.

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Looking forward

NCHV has identified several goals to pursue in the new legislative session. These will likely grow as the year goes on, but will serve as initial targets for our efforts:

- Continued stable funding levels of all homeless veteran assistance programs, and sufficient and sustained resources above those levels where necessary
- In particular, SSVF should be funded at no less than its current \$300 million. Furthermore, the authorization cap should be removed, allowing the Secretary of the VA to re-appropriate unused monies into the SSVF account. NCHV may also advocate for additional appropriations above the current funding level to a possible \$500 million
- A full appropriation of \$50 million for the HVRP program
- The incremental buildup of HUD-VASH should continue through 2015, to include additional project-based vouchers for veterans in areas with a high concentration of chronically homeless veterans
- Permanent authorization of the National Center for Homelessness Among Veterans, the research arm of the VA for homeless veteran issues and the programs in place to serve them

NCHV recently served in an advisory role for the veteran homelessness section of the Fiscal Year 2015 Independent Budget for the Department of Veterans Affairs. The Independent Budget is co-authored by AMVETS, Disabled American Veterans, Paralyzed Veterans of America, and Veterans of Foreign Wars. This budgetary and policy document contains a more exhaustive list, from which the highlights above are drawn, and will be released concurrently with the Administration's budget in early 2014.