

Policy and Legislative Update: “President’s Budget, Eligibility, and HUD-VASH for Native American Veterans”

Joshua Stewart

Assistant Director of Policy

The President’s Budget: Jeopardizing Services for Homeless Veterans

On Monday, February 3, 2015 the President’s Fiscal Year 2016 Budget was announced. This document lays out the Administration’s proposed funding levels for all programs of the federal government, including those that serve homeless and at-risk veterans.

NCHV would like to bring to your attention several changes in the President’s budget this year that could impact your programs, should these changes go into effect. While some new programs are suggested for serving veterans experiencing homelessness, several effective, community-led programs show significant cuts or stymied growth.

New proposals

The President’s budget proposed funding an influx of 67,000 general Housing Choice Vouchers (HCV). These new HCV would focus on several target populations, including homeless veterans – regardless of discharge status.

Within this HCV proposal, the President proposed development of a new Special Purpose Voucher (SPV) program through the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) that would include family, veteran, and tribal family targeting. These new vouchers could number 22,500 from \$177.5 million in appropriations.

These vouchers are not specific to veterans experiencing chronic homelessness, nor are they paired with the comprehensive case management required by HUD-VASH vouchers.

Cuts to or flatlining of existing programs

The Budget proposes significant disinvestments in homeless programs administered by the Department of Veterans Affairs and Department of Housing and Urban Development. The budget proposes that for Fiscal Year 2016:

1. The Supportive Services for Veteran Families (SSVF) program be funded at \$300 million, a flat funding from the previous year and \$75 million less than had previously been appropriated in advance for this year,
2. The HUD-VA Supportive Housing (HUD-VASH) program receive no additional funding for new vouchers or VA case management this year,
3. The Grant and Per Diem (GPD) program be funded at \$201 million, a decrease of \$49 million from the previous year, and
4. The Homeless Veteran Reintegration Program (HVRP), administered through the Department of Labor, receive a flat funding allocation of \$38.109 million.

These disinvestments would significantly impact the ability of communities to serve homeless veterans in need. NCHV is actively working to ensure that you have all of the resources that you need to do your job and end veteran homelessness in this country.

An Update on Preserving Eligibility for GPD and SSVF

NCHV, along with other national non-profit organizations and veteran service organizations, support and are seeking a legislative clarification of the intent of Congress on the utilization of homeless services in the Department of Veterans Affairs. This clarification would re-affirm the status quo of the last 20 years, and prevent an administrative change that would prevent veterans from receiving the help that they need to be permanently housed.

Any such legislation would state that Congress continues to intend that both the Supportive Services for Veteran Families (SSVF) program and the Grant and Per Diem (GPD) program be available to all veterans with an “Other than Honorable” discharge, and to be available to veterans without regard to minimum period of continuous active duty.

Significantly, this legislation would not extend eligibility for these programs to those who received dishonorable discharges, nor to those who were discharged following courts-martial. Neither would this legislation extend any benefits (including healthcare, pensions, or any benefits in Chapter 20, Title 38 U.S.C.) to these veterans, other than access to the GPD and SSVF programs.

Such a clarification would re-affirm an already existing interpretation of the law that has stood since 1992 and the passage of the Homeless Veterans Comprehensive Service Programs Act, which created the Grant and Per Diem program. Without this clarification, the Department of Veterans Affairs will stop serving roughly 15% of the homeless veteran population who desperately need support in their efforts to escape homelessness. In some urban locales, the number of veterans that could be affected by this change is as high as 30% of the population.

Working together with our partners, NCHV is pursuing legislation that would meet these criteria, and prevent the cutting off from services of thousands of homeless veterans.

Expansion of HUD-VASH to Native American Communities

In late January of 2015, the Department of Housing and Urban Development announced that the HUD-VASH program would be expanding into Native American communities, and would be providing permanent supportive housing for Native American veterans there. For years a stumbling block of the program, expanding into Native American communities will go a long way towards making sure every veteran in the nation has a place to call home, even in some of the most rural areas of our country.

NCHV is particularly happy to report on this development, as we have been supportive of exactly this expansion for years. In 2013, writing in support of legislation that would have accomplished this expansion, NCHV went on the record: “Native Americans disproportionately serve in this nation’s Armed Forces. This service deserves to be rewarded by the best support systems our nation can provide. Native American veterans deserve the same services as every other veteran group in America.”

This expansion will invest \$4 million worth of HUD-VASH support into or near-by to tribal lands, supporting the housing of 650 veterans who are currently homeless or at-risk of homelessness.