

Policy and Legislative Update: Big News for VA, Funding, and Changes at the NCHV Annual Conference

Joshua Stewart, Director of Policy

VA Secretary Shulkin Out, New Secretary Nominated

Despite the weeks of controversy in the media about the now ex-VA Secretary, David Shulkin, it was nonetheless a surprise when he was finally relieved of his position by President Trump on Mar. 28, 2018. On the same day, the President nominated as his successor RDML Ronny Jackson. RDML Jackson is a medical doctor who has been the White House physician since 2006, and has been a commissioned officer of the United States Navy since 1995, including a tour in Iraq in 2005/06.

Little is known about RDML Jackson's policy stances or priorities on homelessness or the wider mission of the Department of Veterans Affairs. However, as a medical man and an active duty sailor, NCHV feels he has demonstrated a life-long commitment to serving his fellow servicemembers. We sincerely hope he will be a great success at the helm of the Department, and look forward to working with him following his confirmation to the post. We will have more to report on as he goes through his Senate confirmation hearing.

Congress Passes Final FY2018 Appropriations Bill

On Mar 23, 2018, the president signed a full funding bill for Fiscal Year 2018, which runs from Oct. 1, 2017 until Sept. 30, 2018.

Contained within the text of this omnibus funding package (H.R. 1625) is an array of good news for veteran homeless programs – not just at the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), but also at the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL), and the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD).

The omnibus proposes the following funding levels for our current fiscal year:

- \$340 million for the Supportive Services for Veteran Families (SSVF) program (an increase of \$20 million over last year),
- \$257 million for the Grant and Per Diem (GPD) program (flat funding from last year),
- \$50 million for the Homeless Veterans Reintegration Program (HVRP) at DOL (an increase of \$5 million over last year, and the first time the program has received a full appropriation of its current authorized spending limit), and
- \$40 million for new HUD-VA Supportive Housing (HUD-VASH) vouchers (good for roughly ~5,500 new vouchers).

But the good news is not contained only to budgetary numbers. Contained within the accompanying explanatory reports are instructions to VA on two deeply important issues relating to the HUD-VASH program.

The first is a direction that VA supply case management funding for the new HUD-VASH vouchers created in this bill. Since the President did not request new HUD-VASH vouchers, VA did not request case management funding for new vouchers. However, Congress has acted to create the aforementioned \$40 million worth of new vouchers. This direction ensures that these new vouchers will be case managed – and directs VA to supply a new budgetary projection for case management of all new vouchers. This effectively ends the unfortunate one-year delay between the creation of vouchers and the provision of case management funding we have experienced since 2016.

The second is a direction from Congress that will protect HUD-VASH case management funding from diversion to other purposes in FY2019. Following the confusion of the proposed conversion of HUD-VASH case management funding from “Special Purpose funds” to “General Purpose funds” within VA last year, Secretary Shulkin promised no conversion would be carried out during this fiscal year. He made no such promises for FY 2019, however. This language from Congress directs VA to propose any changes of this type in an annual budget submission; as that submission for FY 2019 has already been made, this should protect HUD-VASH funding at least through the upcoming Fiscal Year.

NCHV thanks those of you who have advocated for these programs over the past year. Even in a difficult budgetary environment, your hard work has paid off.

Big Change to the Policy Portion at the NCHV Annual Conference

Every year since NCHV has hosted its Annual Conference, there has always been a Public Policy session. It is the representation of one of the three core missions of NCHV. This year, it is getting bigger and better – and don’t worry, there will always be a Public Policy session!

There have traditionally been two sections to the policy portion of the Annual Conference: the Public Policy Session and the Federal Partners Session. The former is where we get our advocates up-to-date on what is happening on the Hill, make sure everyone is on message, and give some basic guiding tips to new advocates who may be going to the Hill for the first time. The latter is where we have heard directly from an assembled board of Federal Agency representatives, most usually from VA, HUD, USICH, and DOL.

This year we are adding a third component as part of our addition of “Institutes” to the conference – the Local, State, and Federal Advocacy Institute. This nearly three hour block of sessions will take the advocacy training normally found in the Public Policy Session as its core, but also include training on advocacy for the local and state level as well. Attendees will hear successful advocates discuss the why’s and how’s of their local work, as well as from representatives of NCHV’s national partner organizations who will discuss how to leverage their organization’s resources to succeed when they get home.

This new initiative is part of NCHV’s growing Operation Main Street program which aims to help our members grow their advocacy prowess and make impacts in communities across the country. We recommend at least one member of your staff attend this Institute, so your organization can benefit from the assembled expertise. I look forward to seeing many of you there!