



Statement for the Record of the

NATIONAL COALITION
for **HOMELESS VETERANS**

before the

United States Senate
Committee on Veterans' Affairs

Hearing on Pending Legislation

June 8, 2011

Chairman Murray, Ranking Member Burr, and distinguished members of the committee:

The National Coalition for Homeless Veterans (NCHV) is honored to submit this Statement for the Record to the U.S. Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs. On behalf of the more than 2,400 community- and faith-based organizations nationwide that serve our veterans in crisis, we offer sincere commendation to the Committee Staff for its work on S. 1148, and a few recommendations for the "Veterans Programs Improvement Act of 2011."

Support for homeless veterans programs was initially ramped up under the George W. Bush Administration. During this time the number of homeless veterans, which peaked around 300,000 on any given night in 2002-03, was reduced by half. President Barack Obama understood these gains, and not only undertook the mission to help America's homeless veterans but transformed it. By his directive, and with the continued support of Congress for our nation's veterans, we are now committed to ending veteran homelessness by 2015.

This ambitious goal is within reach due to the leadership and collaboration among the U.S. Departments of Veterans Affairs (VA), Housing and Urban Development (HUD), and Labor (DOL) – which have fortified their relationships with the community organizations NCHV represents. The most recent HUD/VA count determined that on a single night in January 2009, about 76,000 veterans were homeless. This number is down from an estimated 250,000 reported seven years earlier, according to the annual VA CHALENG (Community Homelessness Assessment, Local Education and Networking Groups) reports.

We believe the "Veterans Programs Improvement Act of 2011" includes the vital provisions that are outlined in the congressionally mandated *Opening Doors: Federal Strategic Plan to Prevent and End Homelessness* – and is consistent with the Administration's goal of ending and preventing veteran homelessness by 2015. The bill reauthorizes significant programs that are largely responsible for the dramatic decrease in homelessness among veterans since 2004, and increases funding authorizations to a level that will ensure the success of the Department of Veterans Affairs' Five-Year Plan to End Veteran Homelessness.

S. 1148, "Veterans Programs Improvement Act of 2011"

The focus of NCHV's testimony will be Title I of Chairman Murray's S. 1148, titled "Homeless Veterans Matters." The provisions in this section are either key or complementary to the success of ending veteran homelessness by 2015, including the following:

- Reauthorizing critical programs such as the Department of Labor-Veterans' Employment and Training Service's Homeless Veterans Reintegration Program, the only nationwide employment assistance program dedicated to homeless veterans.
- Reevaluating the repayment method of VA's Homeless Providers Grant and Per Diem Program (GPD), a transitional housing program that is the foundation of VA and community partnerships.
- Expanding VA Special Needs grants to include male homeless veterans with minor dependents, as well as allowing dependents of veterans in those programs to directly receive services.

Sections 101-108 of Title I are examined in detail below.

- *Sec. 101. Enhancement of comprehensive service programs.*

This section applies to the VA Grant and Per Diem Program. Most notably, Sec. 101 would raise the GPD authorization level to \$250 million, accommodating the President's Fiscal Year (FY) 2012 Budget request. Entities eligible for GPD funds, meanwhile, would be extended authority to construct new facilities with capital grant money; current statute only allows for the expansion, remodeling, alteration and acquisition of facilities.

Eligibility for GPD capital grants would also be expanded to allow proposals to use funding from other private and public sources. The current system penalizes providers for using other sources of public funding, which is counterproductive and impairs the delivery of services to homeless veterans.

Regarding subsection (b) of Sec. 101, NCHV agrees with the principle that VA must reconsider the way it reimburses per diem recipients. A year-long study, however, would only mark the beginning of the process to potentially revise this statute. NCHV contends that this issue has been discussed by VA and its community partners for several years, and the need to revise the reimbursement system is widely accepted.

Sec. 202 of Sen. Richard Blumenthal's S. 1060, the "Honoring All Veterans Act of 2011," contains stronger language to revise the GPD reimbursement process. This section would strike "per diem" – which currently peaks at \$38.90 per veteran per day – and reimburse providers for their annual costs of furnishing services. In lieu of mandating a VA study, NCHV encourages the committee to adopt this provision.

- *Sec. 102. Modification of grant program for homeless veterans with special needs.*
- *Sec. 108. Reauthorization of appropriations for grant program for homeless veterans with special needs.*

In addition to reauthorizing the VA Special Needs grant program through FY 2013, the chairman's bill would broaden eligibility for Special Needs grants – which serve women, including those with dependent children; the frail elderly; terminally ill; and chronically mentally ill – to all entities eligible for GPD payments. At present, only GPD grantees may apply for Special Needs funds. Sections 108 and 102 deal with these issues.

Sec. 102 also broadens the clientele to be served by these grants. Males with dependent children would be able to receive help through this program, and for the first time dependents of all enrolled veterans – both male and female – would be able to receive services directly.

- *Sec. 103. Modification of authority for provision of treatment and rehabilitation to certain veterans to include provision of treatment and rehabilitation to homeless veterans who are not seriously mentally ill.*
- *Sec. 105. Extension of certain authorities relating to homeless veterans.*

Although the majority of the homeless veteran population suffers from mental illness, substance abuse or co-occurring disorders, a significant number of these veterans are merely victims of circumstance, especially financial hardship. Sec. 103 of this bill would allow all homeless veterans – regardless of their mental health status – to receive the same homeless assistance outlined under Title 38, Section 2031, United States Code.

In addition to reauthorizing the treatment described above, Sec. 105 of the chairman's bill would extend other authorities, including the Veterans Affairs Secretary's authority to sell, lease or donate property – to the benefit of homeless veterans – that VA has acquired as a result of a

defaulted loan. This provision could have a significant impact on increasing homeless and at-risk veterans' access to housing – one of the most important goals of the VA's Five-Year Plan to End Veteran Homelessness.

- *Sec. 104. Plan to end veteran homelessness.*

Since the inception of VA's plan to end homelessness among veterans, the department has adapted its efforts to encourage service provider inputs and to consider other intervention and preventive developments in the field. Secretary Eric Shinseki considers this "no wrong door" approach key to solving veteran homelessness.

Although a comprehensive blueprint of the VA's plan – such as would be mandated by Sec. 104 of the chairman's bill – does not currently exist, comparable actions have already been taken by the department. Each VA medical center, for instance, has been charged with producing a local action plan consistent with the VA's Five-Year Plan guidelines. The department has also aligned its efforts to end veteran homelessness by 2015 with the U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness (USICH), which published the comprehensive *Federal Strategic Plan to Prevent and End Homelessness* in June 2010.

- *Sec. 106. Reauthorization of appropriations for homeless veterans reintegration program.*

Administered by Department of Labor-Veterans' Employment and Training Service (VETS), the Homeless Veterans Reintegration Program (HVRP) is the single nationwide employment assistance program dedicated to homeless veterans. Its history of effectively and efficiently placing men and women veterans – including those with families and those who are transitioning out of incarceration – in stable employment merits its reauthorization. Sec. 106 of the chairman's bill would extend this program's authorization through FY 2013.

- *Sec. 107. Reauthorization of appropriations for financial assistance for supportive services for very low-income veteran families in permanent housing.*

VA's Supportive Services for Veteran Families (SSVF) Program is designed to promote housing stability for very low-income veterans and their families. According to estimates from the National Alliance to End Homelessness, about 600,000 veterans can be classified as extreme low-income, and are therefore at great risk of becoming homeless.

Sec. 107 of S. 1148, which reauthorizes the SSVF Program in FY 2012, would allow VA to proactively deal with these risks by implementing preventive techniques such as health care, financial planning, legal and child care services, as well as time-limited financial assistance for rent arrearages, utilities, moving expenses, security and utility deposits, transportation and emergency supplies.

In Summation

Only a few months into the 112th Congress, the Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs has reaffirmed its leadership role in the campaign to end veteran homelessness by helping restore \$50 million for new HUD-VA Supportive Housing (HUD-VASH) vouchers in FY 2011. This act alone – which will help more than 7,000 veterans with serious mental illness and other disabilities obtain and maintain housing – has increased the number of housing vouchers needed to end chronic veteran homelessness to more than 60 percent of the goal established in 2008.

By reauthorizing and resourcing the most critical and successful homeless veteran assistance programs in the nation today, passage of S. 1148 – the “Veterans Programs Improvement Act of 2011” – is the necessary next step to fulfill our shared vision of ending veteran homelessness by 2015. NCHV is honored to be a part of this historic undertaking, and we are committed to offering this committee our full support as we move the nation closer to that goal.