

Policy and Legislative Update: “Statements of Support in the Senate, the Public Policy Session at the Annual Conference, and Setting up a Hill Visit.”

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Recent Statement of Support in the Senate

The month of April saw a continuation of support from Members of Congress to the cause of ending veteran homelessness. In the Senate, a “Dear Colleague letter” was circulated that re-affirmed the Senates’ commitment not only to ending veteran homelessness, but also to the continuation of both the Grant and Per Diem (GPD) program and the Supportive Services for Veteran Families (SSVF) program.

The letter originated with Senators Hirono (D-HI) and Crapo (R-ID), and calls for robust funding for these two programs from the Senate Appropriations Committee, specifically the Subcommittee on Military Construction, Veterans Affairs, and Related Agencies. The letter was addressed to Senators Kirk (R- IL) and Tester (D-MT), who are the Chairman and Ranking Member of that subcommittee, respectively.

The letter specifically identifies the GPD and SSVF programs as the way to meet our shared goal: “The need for these programs remains great. As VA continues to work towards the goal of ending veteran homelessness by the end of 2015, we support the critical role the SSVF and GPD programs play in serving veterans and their families in need.”

The letter was signed by 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). NCHV is proud to stand with these Senators in their support for these two programs, and calls on both the Senate and House Appropriations Committees to continue funding them at the level of need demonstrated around the country – and not at the lower levels requested by the President that were discussed in the last issue of the NCHV newsletter.

The Public Policy Session at the NCHV Annual Conference

The NCHV Annual Conference “25 Years: Thank You for Your Service” will take place in Washington, D.C. on May 27-29, 2015. Every year NCHV puts aside an entire half of a day to devote solely to public policy on the national stage; this year we have designated the afternoon of Wednesday the 27th as that time. This year we will be expanding the scope of this session from what has been traditionally covered at past conferences.

NCHV will present a policy update by walking through active legislation on the Hill and potential legislation that is in the works, including any appropriations news that may have become definite by that time. We will also identify who the important players are on the Hill for any of these given proposals or pieces of legislation, and help you distinguish how it is that you can best help not only your own community, but also the national network of service providers. Finally, NCHV will present to you the future of our organization’s advocacy work, and what that will mean for you and your organizations going forward.

In addition these presentations by the NCHV staff and Board of Directors, we will also be joined by representatives from our partner agencies in the federal government. At the time of writing, we had confirmations from the US Department of Housing and Urban Development and the US Department of Veterans Affairs. Representatives from these two agencies, and possibly other major agencies, will join us

to discuss their perspectives on ending veteran homelessness and their Department's policy goals for the future.

Please make time to stop in for the session on Wednesday the 27th, and come ready to tackle some of the final hurdles of the push to end veteran homelessness, as well as questions for our federal partners. NCHV staff looks forward to seeing lots of familiar faces, as well as meeting many new advocates this year.

Setting up a Hill Visit

While many of you will have excellent relationships with the offices of your US Representatives and Senators, those of you who are new to the world of homeless veteran services may not yet have had the opportunity to make those sorts of contacts, or open those lines of communication. But don't worry, as veteran service providers and constituents, you are very likely meet a welcoming reception from your congressional delegation.

These relationships can be useful to your organization in any number of ways; congressional offices can help you in your interactions with federal departments or can intercede on the behalf of individual clients. But even beyond these basic functions of constituent services congressional offices have the role of informing Members of Congress on issues of importance to their district. If you have identified a gap in services in your community, tell your congressional offices! If your community needs more HUD-VASH vouchers, or supportive services dollars, tell your congressional offices! With certain exceptions, they don't have the power to move these funds around by themselves, but if enough constituents express this need to enough Member's offices, then Congress as a whole will be more likely to fund an increase in these programs. The relationship with your congressional offices is not only useful for your organization or community, but for the nation as a whole. Advocate for programs like GPD, SSVF and HUD-VASH as national priorities, and link them to the successes achieved (and challenges faced) by your work in their districts and states.

Setting up a Hill visit is easy, and the NCHV Annual Conference is the perfect opportunity to meet again with contacts you have already made, or to make new ones in offices you have never interacted with before. NCHV recommends attending the public policy session beforehand so that you are aware of what is going on in other communities around the country, and are prepared with all of the knowledge about active legislation you may need in your meetings.

If you can't make the NCHV Annual Conference, and don't plan on being in Washington, D.C. any time soon, you can still be an effective advocate! All US Senators and Representatives have home offices in their districts or states. Staffers and even Members take meetings at these locations all the time, and they can be just as effective as making the trek all the way to the nation's capital.

In addition to meetings with congressional staff, meetings with the Representative or Senator his-or-herself can be achieved. Sometimes, these are best approached by making a request for a "site visit". This would get the Member to your facility to meet with you, be given a tour, speak with the veterans, and (a real draw for elected officials) get them in front of a camera. The benefits to your community of getting a Member to emotionally connect with the work that you are doing cannot be underestimated.

To set a meeting with a congressional office, you must first know by whom you are represented. To find your two Senators for your state, you can visit:

http://www.senate.gov/general/contact_information/senators_cfm.cfm. To find your Representative, you can visit: <http://www.house.gov/representatives/find/>. For your Representative, remember – not only will the Representative for the location of your facility be interested, but also any Representative whose district covers your catchment area.

Once you have found your elected officials, you will be directed to their official websites. There you will find (usually under a tab marked "Contact") phone numbers for district offices and the main Washington, D.C. office, as well as an email form that you can fill out to request a meeting. NCHV recommends personally calling the office to ask for a meeting, and completely discourages the sending of physical mail. Due to security concerns, all physical mail to the offices of Members of Congress is delayed by several weeks so that it may be screened. If you need to send a letter, scan it and email it to the contact information on the Member's website.

Once you have set a time for the meeting, be prepared for it! Staffers have a lot of demands on their time, and as such tend to have short attention spans. Know what you want to talk about before you go, and make sure to have any "asks" decided beforehand. Many staffers will want to know what it is that they can do for you as quickly and succinctly as possible. To that end, make sure to prepare a few short documents to leave behind you that will provide more detailed information than you can cover in the meeting. But be careful, this is also a fine line: you want to give them important information, but if it is too long you run the risk of them not having time to read it.

If this will be your first contact with a congressional office and you are nervous about not knowing the answer to a question you may be asked, don't worry! The best thing that can happen in your first meeting is that you have to say "I don't know, but I will go home and find out and be in touch with you soon." This ensures that you will have a follow-up and provides the opportunity to keep your new line of communication open. Nothing bad can happen, and if you are lucky you just may make a difference.