

Statement for the record of the



**United States Senate
Committee on Veterans' Affairs**

Hearing on
Pending Legislation

February 7, 2018

Chairman Isakson, Ranking Member Tester, and distinguished members of the Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs:

The National Coalition for Homeless Veterans (NCHV) is honored to present this statement for the record for the legislative hearing of February 7, 2018. On behalf of the 2,100 community- and faith-based organizations NCHV represents, we thank you for your commitment to serving our nation's most vulnerable heroes.

This statement reflects NCHV's mission of ending veteran homelessness and the bill presented at the hearing today that has the potential to most strongly impact that mission. There are three actions we should be carrying out as a country to further the goal of ending veteran homelessness: 1) supporting and - only where necessary- expanding current services, 2) spurring the creation of affordable housing, and 3) filling service gaps in our current system. If passed into law S. 1072, the Homeless Veterans Prevention Act of 2017, would accomplish the first and last of these.

S. 1072 would fill long-standing, critical gaps in our service delivery system. Despite years of progressively better services, accumulated expertise, and best practices, there are still areas in which we know we need to do better. For decades, the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs has conducted the CHALENG report and survey which among other things identifies the unmet needs of homeless veterans. And for decades, this report has consistently revealed that among the highest unmet needs of male and female homeless veterans are help with legal issues of all kinds. Family law plays a particularly prominent role, but also legal issues revolving around restoring driver's licenses, discharge upgrades, and financial issues are reported annually. And of course, legal assistance to prevent eviction and foreclosure is frequently reported.

The long term, consistent nature of this unmet need points to a very real gap in our services. Section 3 of the Homeless Veterans Prevention Act would go a long way to ameliorating these issues for many veterans. The provision is well crafted and highlights the exact service need, while also allowing the Secretary leeway to add additional areas for legal services as he or she finds necessary.

Similar to legal service's frequent appearance on the CHALENG report is the issue of dental care. The provision of dental care has consistently appeared on the top unmet needs list of homeless veterans for decades; in the most recent CHALENG report it was particularly pronounced in the female homeless veteran population. Though important in their own right, dental care is not merely a comfort or confidence concern. Untreated dental needs can cause severe health issues, and constant pain can be a trigger for self-medication and/or substance abuse. Furthermore, pain or unsightly dental features can wreck the confidence of a job seeker- causing a negative impact on the employment potential of a veteran.

Extending dental care eligibility to homeless veterans in the HUD-VA Supportive Housing and Grant and Per Diem (GPD) programs, as well as those in the care of a Domiciliary, would be a huge step in the right direction. And that is exactly what Section 4 of S. 1072 accomplishes.

In addition to filling these critical gaps in our service delivery system, this bill would also support our existing programs in two important ways; it allows the payment of *per diem* to GPD providers who serve the dependents of homeless veterans, and it extends the authority for the Supportive Services for Veteran Families (SSVF) program.

As we modernize GPD, our transitional housing program at the VA, it becomes more and more clear that these providers need the authority to serve dependents of homeless veterans. While there are a very few providers who already do this, they must scrape together funding from other sources to make it work. Many providers who see the importance of this work and who wish to expand into it simply cannot make the math work. They need support from VA to make this shift possible. As it is now, veterans – in particular female veterans who statistically are more likely to be accompanied by children in their homelessness – are faced with the choice to get only themselves off the street or to stay with their children. Many understandably choose family unity and wait for permanent housing options together, out-of-doors. Section 2 of S. 1072 would open the door for many more GPD providers to serve dependents; keeping families together, and improving the efficiency of our system.

Finally, S. 1072 supports our existing programs by extending the authority for the SSVF program. But this is not merely a mundane annual re-authorization, and nor can it be. Because of an historical quirk in funding, there are 56 communities whose “surge funding” – awarded in FY 2015 – expired at the end of FY 2017. To maintain the normal schedule of funding (\$300 million *per annum*) and prevent the loss of services from the surge grants (\$207 million over the next three years) the funding for the SSVF program for FY 2018 must be no less than \$400 million. A list of communities who received surge funding and who are at risk of losing services without an increased FY 2018 appropriation can be found at https://www.va.gov/HOMELESS/ssvf/docs/SSVF_September2014_GrantRecipients.pdf.

Section 6 of S. 1072 provides the SSVF program an authorization of \$500 million, which would allow VA to redistribute another round of surge funding at almost the same level as the FY 2015 round. This is the best scenario, and one which NCHV heartily supports. Of course, we must also point out that Section 6 would now need a technical correction to proposed subparagraph (F), changing “fiscal year 2017” to “fiscal year 2018”, or even to “fiscal year 2019”. The latter change would exacerbate the gap in services felt in communities, but would allow the appropriations committees time to fully fund the increased authorization.

This one technical correction notwithstanding, the Homeless Veterans Prevention Act of 2017 is an outstanding piece of legislation. NCHV strongly supports S. 1072, and asks the Senate and the House to quickly pass it in its entirety. We thank the Senate Committee on Veterans’ Affairs for its tenacity on these issues, as well as the bills long-time sponsor, Senator Burr. All of your work on behalf of homeless veterans is commendable.

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