

**California Senate Transportation and Housing Committee & Senate Veterans Affairs Committee
Joint Oversight Hearing
The Veterans Housing and Homelessness Prevention (VHHP) Program**

Good afternoon. My name is Danica Bogicevic, and I am the Acting Network Homeless Coordinator for the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, Network 21. I am responsible for the coordination and oversight of all VA Homeless Programs across the 4 VA Health Care Systems in Northern California, as well as 3 others in Nevada and the Pacific Islands. I am also a participant in the VHHP Stakeholder Advisory Group¹, as is my counterpart in VA Network 22, which includes the 4 VA Health Care Systems in Southern California². It is my pleasure to be here today to provide a brief overview of VA Homeless Programs in California, and to share some information about homeless Veterans .

Fifty percent of homeless Veterans are 51 years old or older. They have substantial health problems and report high rates of nonfatal suicidal behavior. A recent study showed that these older homeless Veterans were approximately 2 ½ years younger at time of death and twice as likely to attempt suicide than their non-homeless counterparts. Across all age groups, homeless Veterans have significant psychosocial factors that should be known by service providers who aim to work with this population. Research shows that 51% of individual homeless veterans have disabilities, 50% have serious mental illness and 70% have substance abuse problems. Many homeless Veterans have comorbid conditions, meaning a combination of two or more of these conditions.

The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs' Homeless Programs were initiated by Public Law in 1987. Since then, VA Homeless Programs have grown exponentially to include a full spectrum of services, all with a goal of permanently housing our Veterans. Our programs include homeless prevention and rapid rehousing, emergency housing, residential treatment, transitional housing, and permanent supportive housing. Our permanent supportive housing program, HUD-VASH, now includes multi-disciplinary staff such as social workers, nurses, Occupational Therapists, and Peer Support Specialists. These HUD-VASH teams work with Veterans using a Housing First Model to assist them with their transition from being homeless to becoming housed, and continue to work with them while housed using Harm Reduction and Motivational Interviewing techniques to maintain their stability in housing. Our programs also include specialized employment, dental and healthcare programs for homeless Veterans, and we provide outreach in the jails and prisons, on the streets and in the shelters, and we support Veterans Treatment Courts and other specialty courts with dedicated VA Justice Outreach staff. Additionally, we partner with our local Homeless Continuums of Care, Public Housing Authorities, Veterans Service Organizations, and countless other federal, state and local partners to address the needs of homeless Veterans and those at risk of homelessness.

Within the state of California, federal VA Homeless Programs provide funding for 729 emergency housing or shelter beds across 47 programs with community partners through our Health Care for Homeless Veterans or HCHV contracts. We provide per diem payments for 2,720 transitional housing beds across 96 grants in our Grant and Per Diem Program. Through our Supportive Services for Veteran Family Program (SSVF), VA awards grants to non-profit organizations to provide prevention and rapid rehousing services to Veteran households. Many of our SSVF grantees in California have been awarded

renewals of their grants annually. For services to be provided in FY16, we have 29 organizations in California that were awarded over \$35.7M in SSVF grants; this is in addition to the 26 grants that were awarded in FY15 to priority communities for “Surge Funding” totaling over \$98M for services to be provided over the course of 3 years. Our largest housing program by far is our HUD-VASH program, a partnership between VA and HUD, which includes a rental subsidy for permanent housing through HUD and the local public housing authority, and case management from the VA. There are over 78,000 HUD-VASH vouchers nationwide, and we have approximately 14% of them within California, with approximately 11,000 active HUD-VASH vouchers as of today (11,111).

In addition to the resources and services we provide, the VA has been actively participating in the Mayors Challenge³, which has 32 California Mayors & Board of Supervisors signed up, we have 5 cities that are part of the federal initiative known as the “25 Cities Initiative”⁴, and we participate in the Zero:2016⁵ Initiatives on ending Veteran and Chronic Homelessness with 9 California communities.

Despite all of the resources we have and all the efforts made by our Veterans, our VA Homeless Program staff, and our many partners, we have at least two significant challenges that we face in California should be highlighted: the sheer number of homeless Veterans and the shortage of affordable housing.

According to HUD’s 2015 Homeless Point-in-Time Count, there were over 47,000 Homeless Veterans nationwide, with over 11,000 of those in California (11,311). We have nearly 24% of all homeless Veterans in our state alone, yet our overall Veteran population in California is only 8% of all Veterans nationwide. The three states with the next highest numbers of homeless Veterans, Florida, New York and Texas, did not even have as many homeless Veterans combined than in California (combined 8,718). We clearly have a disproportionate number of homeless Veterans, which leads to discussion on the second challenge, the housing costs in California.

As you know, there have been numerous news reports and studies showing that many parts of California have been experiencing several consecutive years of extremely high rent increases, low vacancy rates, and a general lack of affordable housing, especially for middle income and low income residents. Even with a HUD-VASH voucher, which provides, among other things, a section 8 voucher subsidy, it is extremely challenging to house our Veterans due to a challenging housing market. In some cities, the rent increases have gone up so dramatically that they have outpaced increases in HUD’s payment standards, and the voucher subsidy is not high enough to meet market rate costs. For example, in San Francisco, the Housing Authority’s regular Payment Standard for a 1-bedroom apartment is \$1,995, though the median rent for a 1-br is over \$3500. Though many of our Housing Authorities, have received permission from HUD to increase their payment standards, even those increased rates do not always allow our Veterans to find viable options in an extremely competitive rental market in many California cities.

Additionally, many communities have extremely low vacancy rates in their rental markets, lower than 5% in communities such as Santa Rosa, Santa Clara, San Diego and other areas. Finally, there are still some landlords who will not rent their properties to those on a section 8 voucher, even if it is a Veteran, which further limits the available housing options.

One way in which our high housing costs in California has an impact on our ability to end Veteran homelessness may be reflected in our data on our utilization of our HUD-VASH vouchers:

- As of this week, over 84% of all HUD-VASH vouchers nationwide were leased up, with some regions experiencing rates close to, or more than 90% leased up. In California, our current leased up rate is approximately 75%.
- In FY15, the national average for time from when a Veteran received their voucher from the Housing Authority to when they leased up was 59 days, while in California the average was 72 days, with some areas averaging 84 days or more. On November 30th, we had over 2,000 Veterans in California with an issued voucher who were actively searching for housing.

For these and many other reasons, the VA Homeless Programs in California have been extremely interested in the Veterans Housing and Homeless Prevention (VHHP) Program. The VA has provided letters of support for a number of VHHP applications, including many that were already awarded in Round 1. Some of those applicants have requested to partner directly with the VA and our Public Housing Authorities to use HUD-VASH vouchers in their projects. Some of those applicants may not be planning to use HUD-VASH vouchers at all, but are looking to VA to partner on referrals and access to VA services for their residents.

Not all homeless or at-risk Veterans qualify for HUD-VASH, so even if we had enough housing to utilize all of our HUD-VASH vouchers, we would still have thousands of Veteran households in need of affordable housing. Many of these Veterans would also benefit from supportive services that will assist them in their housing stability. The VHHP's goals to house Veterans at all income levels and to provide supportive services demonstrates foresight and knowledge about the needs of this population. Those of us who work within VA Homeless Programs in California are eager to see the development of additional affordable housing for Veterans in California, and we stand ready to provide what information we can that will assist you in your implementation of the VHHP Program.

Footnotes:

¹ - VHHP Stakeholder Advisory Group is hosted/convened by the Institute for Population Health Improvement at UC Davis

² – VISN 22 NHC - Jennifer Gerrib (VISN 22 VA Health Care Systems: Greater Los Angeles, Loma Linda, Long Beach, San Diego)

³ - Mayors Challenge: California:

Mayor Harvey Hall - Bakersfield
Mayor Sam Storey - Capitola
Mayor Matt Hall - Carlsbad
Mayor George N. Cretekos - Clearwater
Mayor Lee Haydu - Del Mar
Mayor Teresa Barth - Encinitas
Mayor Lisa Yarbrough-Gauthier - East Palo Alto
Mayor Bill Harrison - Fremont
Mayor Ashley Swearengin - Fresno
Mayor Acquanetta Warren - Fontana
Mayor Paula Perotte - Goleta
Mayor Art Madrid - La Mesa
Mayor Mary Sessom - Lemon Grove
Mayor John Marchand - Livermore
Mayor Robert Garcia - Long Beach
Mayor Eric Garcetti - Los Angeles
Mayor Jean Quan - Oakland
Mayor Jim Wood - Oceanside
Mayor Karen Holman - Palo Alto

Mayor Richard D. O'Brien - Riverbank
Mayor Rusty Bailey - Riverside
Mayor Kevin Johnson - Sacramento
Mayor Kevin Faulconer - San Diego
Mayor Edwin M. Lee - San Francisco
Mayor Chuck Reed - San Jose
Mayor Jan Marx - San Luis Obispo
Mayor Helene Schneider - Santa Barbara
Dave Cortese - Santa Clara County
Mayor Don Lane - Santa Cruz
Board of Supervisors Chairperson Zack Friend - Santa Cruz County
Mayor Jim Reed - Scotts Valley
Mayor (Dr.) Nancy A. Bilicich - Watsonville
Mayor Lindsey Horvath - West Hollywood
Mayor Christopher Cabaldon - West Sacramento

⁴ - 25 Cities: Joint effort between VA, HUD, USICH & local partners in those 25 communities with high concentrations of homeless Veterans. These 25 cities accounted for 40% of all homeless Veterans in the U.S. when it was started in 2014. (Riverside, San Diego, LA, SF, & Fresno)

⁵ - Zero: 2016: **California:**

Sacramento City & County CoC
Richmond/Contra Costa County CoC
Watsonville/Santa Cruz City & County CoC
Fresno/Madera County CoC

Los Angeles City & County CoC
San Diego City and County CoC
Santa Maria/Santa Barbara County CoC
Bakersfield/Kern County CoC
Riverside City & County CoC