



A PUBLIC-PRIVATE PARTNERSHIP FOR HOMELESS VETERANS

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Testimony before
The United States House of Representatives
Committee on Financial Services
Subcommittee on Housing and Community Opportunity
on
HR 4057-Samaritan Initiative
July 13, 2004

Presented by
Stephanie Buckley
Director – U.S.VETS Prescott

United States Veterans Initiative is a 501(C)(3) non-profit organization
whose mission is the successful reintegration of homeless veterans.
We provide housing and a variety of supportive services to over 1800 homeless veterans each night
in Los Angeles, Long Beach, Riverside, Las Vegas, Honolulu, Phoenix, Prescott, Houston, and
Washington, D.C.

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INTRODUCTION

On behalf of the United States Veterans Initiative Mr. Peck and I appreciate the opportunity to discuss recommendations on HR 4057, which we hope will assist programs that serve the homeless veteran population. We would like to commend your continued interest in and commitment to dealing with the challenging issues of homelessness, particularly among this nation's veterans.

I came to United States Veterans Initiative with a Masters Degree in counseling and have been with the organization since 2002 as the Director of the Fort Whipple U.S.VETS program on the Bob Stump DVA Medical Center grounds in Prescott, Arizona. I have been working with the homeless population since 1997. I am the chairman of the Affordable Housing and Homeless Coalition of Yavapai County, a member of the Mayor's Task Force on Affordable Housing, and a member of the Treatment Forum of Yavapai County.

United States Veterans Initiative is a 501(c)(3) non-profit corporation devoted exclusively to providing services to homeless veterans. It is part of an innovative partnership known as U.S.VETS. The other partner in this joint venture is Cloudbreak Development, LLC (a for-profit California limited liability company) which acquires and renovates the housing and provides ongoing property management expertise. Our organization was established in 1993 in Los Angeles, California and its mission is the successful reintegration of homeless veterans to their highest level of independence as rapidly as possible.

U.S.VETS is the largest provider of housing, job assistance, counseling and outreach for homeless veterans in the country. On any given night U.S.VETS is able to house 1,891 veterans in Los Angeles, Long Beach, Riverside, Honolulu, Las Vegas, Prescott, Phoenix, Houston, and Washington, D.C. Last year, fueled by our National AmeriCorps program, we were able to outreach to 9,305 veterans across the country.

U.S.VETS programs are based on a self-determination model. We believe that Veterans who are clinically capable of work should be given the dignity of taking responsibility for themselves through the means of their own production. This "hand up" concept instills hope, which gives them the fuel they need to address the multitude of issues that keep them perpetually homeless. Not only is this idea clinically sound, but is also cost efficient for the taxpayers, as previous users of the system become contributors to the system. With the help of local VA's and community partners, Veterans Initiative staff conducts over 20 different groups each week at each of our 11 sites, including relapse prevention, anger management, PTSD, parenting, skills development, money management, transitional planning, job development and a variety of 12 Step groups. We maintain zero tolerance for drug and alcohol use within our programs, and 95% of the veterans served maintain sobriety as indicated by regular testing. On-site career centers serve 1,000 veterans each week with computer training, literacy and math classes, DVOPs and legal services. 85% of the homeless veterans entering the programs have jobs within 35 days with the help of our Career Centers.

U.S.VETS entered into an enhanced use lease with the VA for a wing of the underutilized Domiciliary space in Prescott in order to provide housing and support services to the veterans of Northern Arizona. Fort Whipple U.S.VETS has been operating since January 16, 2003. It is a 58-bed program on the Bob



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Stump DVA Medical Center grounds, which is always full with a waiting list of veterans desiring housing.

Since opening the program just 18 months ago, we have been able to serve 206 homeless veterans. 74% of the veterans leaving the program have successfully discharged to apartments, homes or with family. Through our Career Center, which is open to all veterans in the community, we have been able to obtain 112 full time jobs for veterans in the program. On average, the Career Center serves 50 unique veterans and logs over 600 hours on eight computers every week. Two of our residents have been able to complete their college degrees, one in business management and the other in nursing, and five more will graduate in December 2004 with degrees in computer technology. 99% of the veterans in the program are males, 88% of the veterans are from the Vietnam Era, and 10% are from the Iraq conflict. 80-85% of the veterans that enter the program are seriously mentally ill, 63% have Hepatitis C, 48 % are physically disabled and 60-75% have substance abuse issues. The majority would be considered “chronically homeless”.

Every year we outreach to over 900 veterans in more than 20 different organizations, and in the forests of Northern Arizona. There are an estimated 2,000 homeless veterans in Yavapai and Coconino Counties. The introduction of the U.S.VETS program has had an extremely positive impact on the Fort Whipple Domiciliary. Their census has increased from 75% to over 92%, and the length of stay for veterans in the Domiciliary has decreased from an average of 120+ days to 98 days. Domiciliary staff report that positive discharges have also increased since the opening of the U.S.VETS.

RECOMMENDATION REGARDING THE HR-4057-SAMASITAN INITIATIVE

U.S.VETS supports any measure that provides assistance to programs serving the homeless, particularly those that make provisions for our homeless veterans. HR-4057, introduced by Representative Rick Renzi (R-AZ), describing a coordinated, multi-agency competitive grant program to address chronic homelessness is a valuable opportunity for communities to assist the estimated 299,000 veterans that sleep on the streets of this country on any given night. We do have concerns about several items in the measure, and would like to make the following recommendations:

- The \$10 million authorized to VA to perform its functions in the multi-departmental collaborative program is set up simply as a directive to the Department of Veterans Affairs to earmark previously authorized funding for treatment of homeless veterans under Medical Care, rather than as a separate and distinct authorization. This really does nothing to increase care for homeless veterans. We recommend a new line item authorization for Samaritan services within VA Medical Care, rather than a \$10 million re-direction of existing VA specialized homeless services programs. The VA component of the Samaritan program should not be funded at the expense of existing programs, which are already overstretched and underfunded!
- The legislation requires applicants to provide a 25% non-federal cash or in-kind match in years one and two and a steep 50% in years three and beyond. These match levels suggest that this grant program is targeted to already well-funded applicants. Even relatively large non-profits like ours, with many collaborative agreements with local providers, would have considerable difficulty raising such amounts, and small community based and faith based organizations are very unlikely to be able to generate such a sizable match.



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- To successfully fuel the creation and sustain the operation of more supportive permanent housing that targets the homeless population for the long term will require HHS and VA to deliver ongoing support for services directly to those providers operating housing programs. Supportive permanent housing programs that serve those with the most severe conditions - - those who are truly chronically homeless -- will not be able to continue without reliable and ongoing funding. Developing incentives for local and state governments to assist projects would be a way to increase the communities' commitment to working towards a solution being sought by Samaritan and Ending Long-term Homelessness Services Initiative.
- Authorized treatment and supportive services in the measure does not mention rehabilitative, prosthetic and other services that may be especially critical to homeless veterans with service-connected disabilities. The legislation should be strengthened by inserting the full range of treatment and supportive services needed by veterans with service-connected disabilities.
- The list of eligible treatment and supportive services should be expanded to include an explicit authorization for assistance to chronically homeless persons in obtaining benefits for which they may be eligible, including Veteran Disability, Veteran Compensation, Veteran Health Care, Medicaid, Medicare, Social Security Disability Insurance, Supplement Security Income, Food Stamps, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families and legal aid.