

Senate Oversight Hearing – 1-5-16

Theresa Gunn – Testimony

Deputy Secretary, CalVet Farm and Home Purchasing Division,

Thank you Chairman and esteemed members for asking me to speak with you today. I'm going to give you a general overview of Veteran housing issues in California and a brief discussion on the role VHHP serves in addressing veteran homelessness. In your packet, handout #2, has many facts and figures for your use and my comments will touch on most of the information. Once finished, I'll take questions before handing the floor over to Susan Riggs of HCD to review the VHHP program from lessons learned to where we are with the second NOFA.

I'd like to start my comments by briefly explaining what sets the experiences of veterans apart from their civilian counterparts. I believe that this is an important distinction to make because veterans are overrepresented in the US homeless population and as I'll explain in my remarks later, the types of housing and supportive services we provide to veterans experiencing homelessness is important because the veteran experience is so different from civilians. If we don't recognize that as providers, we will not end veteran homelessness.

So I'll start by highlighting some areas where the veteran experience is so different from the civilian experience. Military service is a unique culture – a veteran culture, because the shared experiences and military lifestyle form a shared set of beliefs, experiences, perspectives, and even a shared language that is both distinct and different from other cultures.

Some experiences unique only to veterans are:

- Bootcamp and the process of transitioning from a civilian into a soldier, airman, sailor or marine
- Duty stations that are mostly separated from the service members' hometown, home state and even home country
- War and combat
- Deployments
- The unique traditions, terminology and structure within the different branches of service
- Readjustment after war or deployment
- Readjustment to civilian life and the transition from the military

Each of these experiences is imprinted upon the heart and mind of a veteran and remains with them for life. There are few experiences in the civilian world that compare to joining the military and most veterans feel at least somewhat disjointed or disconnected when they separate or retire from military service.

Veterans make up 10% of California's homeless population but only 8.5% of the nation's homeless population. Since 2007, California's homeless veterans account for roughly 25% of the nation's homeless veterans. Comparatively, California's total homeless population is 20% of the nation's homeless population. This disparity is present for a number of reasons, a few of which are outlined on slides 10 and 11 in Handout #2 of your packet.

In 2009 the US Secretary of Veterans Affairs set an ambitious goal to end veteran homelessness by December 2015. At the time, homeless veterans accounted for 11.7% of the nation's homeless population but were 14.5% of California's homeless population. The federal directive significantly raised awareness and focused many governmental entities to prioritize funding for veterans. Since this proclamation, federal funds have increased for VASH vouchers, the USDVA's budget went from \$100 billion in 2009 to \$163.9 billion in 2014.

In 2013, California made history by authorizing the single largest state contribution to end veteran homelessness with the passage of AB 639 and Proposition 41. AB 639 instituted the Veterans Housing and Homeless Prevention Act and Proposition 41 authorized \$600 million in GO bonds to support the act. To date no other state has replicated what California has done.

The VHHP Act:

- Only authorizes capital funding for housing veterans and their families, no supportive service dollars.
- Defines a veteran broader than any other state and federal program, thereby enabling more veterans to be eligible for the housing.
- Includes veterans of all discharge statuses in the definition of veteran, i.e. even includes dishonorable discharge.
- Requires half of the capital development funding to target Extremely Low Income, less than 30% Area Median Income, veterans.

- At least 60% of the ELI targeted housing shall be permanent supportive housing. (Permanent supportive housing requires supportive services to be included.)
- requires the leveraging of other funding
- requires priority be given to projects that combine housing with supportive services included

The intent of the VHHP Act is to house veterans. With over 11,000 homeless veterans and the average cost per housing unit at roughly \$120,000, there are insufficient state resources to provide housing to all homeless veterans. However, our goal is to house as many as possible. But just building housing isn't sufficient, especially when a significant portion is required to be PSH for ELI. PSH requires wrap-around services. As I mentioned in my opening, veterans are a unique culture unto themselves. Their uniqueness requires the providers of these wrap-around services to not only understand the veteran culture but to have programs that are veteran-centric.

The type and degree of wrap-around services that a housing program delivers to veterans is instrumental for the success of the veteran client because:

- veterans are their civilian counterpart. The U.S. military service is a distinct cultural experience, the effects of that service, both positive and negative, remain with a veteran for life and influences their perspective, beliefs, future experiences, and oftentimes their psychological and physiological states.

- Because of this, veterans have higher rates of success with securing employment, stable housing, completing residential treatment programs and addressing mental and physical health needs when they participate in veteran-focused programs.
- The mere fact that veterans are overrepresented in the homeless population, have higher unemployment rates than most certain civilian age-groups, and are less than 10% of the total U.S. population support the different cultural experience and the need for veteran-focused programs.

Without this type of approach, many veterans may not be able to return to contributing members of society and or won't participate in the housing, i.e they may prefer to remain homeless. Some examples of Veteran-focused programs are those that:

- understand the veteran experience – often because they have professional and clinical staff who are veterans or who have a history of working with veterans
- are trained and educated in the nuances and underlying foundations of military life and culture
- know how to navigate the network of federal/state benefits and services that are available to only veterans and some expertise about the benefits veterans may be entitled to receive

As with all other successful programs, we must recognize and embrace the different needs of our veterans in order to successfully serve them.