



CALIFORNIA ASSOCIATION OF VETERAN SERVICE
AGENCIES

Training, Housing & Counseling for California Veterans ★

January 5, 2016

Senator Jim Beall, Chair
Senate Transportation and Housing Committee

Senator Jim Nielsen, Chair
Senate Veterans Affairs Committee

RE: CAVSA Testimony: Oversight of the Implementation of the Veterans Housing and Homeless Prevention Program (VHHP)

Dear Senator Beall and Nielsen:

I am writing on behalf of the California Association of Veteran Service Agencies (CAVSA) to thank you for the opportunity to comment on the VHHP program implementation. CAVSA is an Association of 6 community-based veteran service agencies operating facilities up and down California from Eureka to San Diego. We are full service agencies that provide housing and a rich array of supportive services to veterans and their families.

CAVSA Members, including New Directions for Veterans, U.S.VETS and Veteran Resource Centers of America, were recently awarded funding for six projects in the First Proposition 41 NOFA, totaling more than \$22 million that will create more than 300 units of affordable housing for veterans, accompanied by support services.

CAVSA has presented extensive testimony and comment on the implementation of the VHHP. In October 2015, our members presented testimony before the Assembly Veterans Affairs Committee and a copy of that testimony is attached for your review.

CAVSA appreciates the fact that your committees are reviewing the Proposition 41 process and we offer our expertise and support in that effort.

Sincerely,


Chuck Helget, Executive Director
California Association of Veteran Service Agencies

Cc: Members of the Senate Transportation and Housing Committee and Veterans Affairs Committee

**Assembly Housing and Veterans Affairs Joint Committee Hearing
Veterans Housing and Homeless Prevention Program
Proposition 41 Oversight**

October 15, 2015

Good afternoon. My name is Stephen Peck and I'm the President and CEO of U.S.VETS. We are the largest veteran specific housing and support service provider in the country. We started in Los Angeles in 1993 and have grown to 11 sites in 6 states and the District of Columbia, housing more than 3,000 homeless and at risk veterans every night. 1,300 of those beds are in Southern California. I'm also the President of the California Association of Veteran Service Agencies, known as CAVSA, and I am speaking on their behalf here today.

First of all, we'd like to offer our gratitude to Governor Brown, the State Legislature and California voters for approving the \$600 million in general obligation bonds that support this first round of housing funds for homeless veterans. This funding will dramatically enhance our efforts to provide our veterans and their families with housing and needed supportive services.

Based on the most recent Point In Time counts, on a given night nearly 15,000 California veterans experienced homelessness, representing nearly 26 percent of the nation's homeless veterans. In 2015, the City of Los Angeles alone had 10 percent of the nation's homeless veterans.

Additionally, more than 100,000 of California's veterans live below the poverty line, one paycheck or disability check away from homelessness. For these vulnerable veterans it is essential to not only provide the affordable housing, but services such as case management, drug and alcohol counseling, health clinics, disability benefit advocacy, mental health support as well as family and childcare services. It is these supportive services that are critical to the success of this program. Addressing the issues that caused their homelessness in the first place is the only way we are going to help veterans and their families escape the vicious cycle of homelessness.

CAVSA is an Association of 6 community-based veteran service agencies operating facilities up and down California from Eureka to San Diego. We are full service agencies that provide housing and a rich array of supportive services to veterans and their families.

- We serve over 25,000 veterans each year
- We operate over 2,500 housing units
- We place over 2,000 veterans in jobs every year
- We help nearly 10,000 veterans access mental health services each year

Our agencies have been serving veterans since the 1970's and to us, Proposition 41 is a game changer for the homeless and at-risk veterans we serve, so it is important to us that this is done right.

CAVSA was actively engaged in the development of the Proposition 41 Guidelines, making sure that veterans and veteran specific agencies were represented in the development of the bill.

CAVSA Members, including New Directions for Veterans, U.S.VETS and Veteran Resource Centers of America, were recently awarded funding for six projects in the First Proposition 41 NOFA, totaling more than \$22 million that will create more than 300 units of affordable housing for veterans, accompanied by support services. We look forward to the second NOFA as the need is so great and the more housing we can create, the more lives we will save.

Our compliments to HCD, CalHFA and CVDA! We believe that the First NOFA was very successful, especially considering the very short timelines that were established to get the first round funding out-the-door and the short timeframe for submitting applications.

We believe that the initial Guidelines for the first NOFA were a reasonable balance of housing and services. We strongly support the standards established in the first round Guidelines for supportive service plans and providers. These standards will insure that the veterans housed in Proposition 41 projects receive the highest quality supportive services and will help insure the long-term success of Proposition 41 projects.

We are also very supportive of the veteran cultural competency standards in the guidelines. Those standards award additional scoring points for a lead service provider that has "...demonstrated expertise working with homeless veterans". We also support the additional awarding of scoring points for lead service providers where at least 20 percent of their clients were veterans. Our many years of experience tell us that this level of experience, not only knowledge of veterans specific issues, but knowledge of the system of care unique to veterans, dramatically improves the long term success and well being of the veterans we serve. In fact, we

believe these standards need to be even more stringent.

The regional (urban/rural) mix of projects seemed to be about right. The emphasis on urban areas reaches the higher density veteran populations, while at the same time reaching out to the more dispersed veterans that will be served by the rural projects.

I would like to touch on a few points of concern regarding the First NOFA, but **before discussing concerns, I would like to note that the Second NOFA was just released on Wednesday and we are still analyzing the changes in the Guidelines. It appears that the Second NOFA and Guidelines address some of our concerns that I will be mentioning. In particular, there appears to be additional scoring allocated for service provider plans that are veteran centric and show experience with veteran cultural competency. We appreciate those revisions as well as the efforts in the Second NOFA to simplify scoring. In any case, the points that I will be expressing will be discussed and refined during the upcoming workshops on the Second NOFA.**

First: Military Cultural Competency: We cannot emphasize enough, the need for service providers who understand the military culture in which our veterans served in order to better provide supportive services and to effectively end the cause of their chronic homelessness.

In November 2014, the Rand Corporation released the results of a survey of civilian mental health care specialists showing that only 13 percent met the survey's criteria for military "cultural competency." An overwhelming majority of non-VA mental health care providers lack an understanding of military mores, language, and culture and were unfamiliar with proven treatments for PTSD and post-combat depression.

Therefore, we will continue to urge the Proposition 41 agencies to include standards in the Guidelines that require that service providers have at least two years of **direct proven** experience providing comprehensive supportive services to veterans and that the 20% client base be raised to 30%. We do not think that it is unreasonable to require that service providers for projects funded by veterans bonds have an established record of military cultural competency!

The 2d NOFA Guidelines do move in the right direction by adding standards and scoring for veteran centric services and staffing that has veteran cultural competency

Secondly: Availability of data and analysis from the first NOFA: While we have received some limited data from the first NOFA, we still have not seen any analysis of that data. We understand that it is hard to draw conclusions from only one NOFA. We have heard concerns about the lack of qualified service providers, but we have not seen any real data that supports that conclusion. It is clear to us that the long-term success of Proposition 41 projects will require both the highest quality housing developer and the highest quality service provider. We believe the Guidelines should insure both!

Third: Funding for Supportive Services: While Proposition 41 is a major policy tool for ending veteran homelessness in California, without targeted funding for supportive services, the positive impacts of Proposition 41 will be short-lived. Without long-term funding for supportive services, many of the veterans housed in Proposition 41 projects will return to the streets.

While California's homeless veterans population shares some characteristics with the non-veteran homeless population, there are many significant differences that support the need for culturally competent supportive services as a key element for retaining long-term housing. For example, the number of homeless veterans reporting disabilities (includes substance abuse, mental illness and physical disabilities) is 53% as opposed to 41% in the non- veteran homeless population.

CAVSA is committed to an advocacy program to secure and increase supportive services funding from federal and state agencies to insure that the commitment made by California voters in approving Proposition 41 will result in projects that support the needs of our homeless veteran population. We look forward to working with you to achieve this goal.

We would like to make a few Recommendations:

Female Veterans: We have ongoing concerns about better serving our female veterans. They are particularly vulnerable and those suffering from Military Sexual Trauma may well need separation from the general veteran population. We believe these needs may best be served by separation in transitional supportive housing initially, where they can receive the critical intensive services, rather than permanent housing.

The 2d NOFA recognizes the legal conflicts that arise from placing same sex restrictions on housing projects but appropriately allow a pathway for

funding such projects if supported by a legal opinion letter.

Transitional housing: The First NOFA tended to set a lower scoring priority for transitional housing projects. We firmly believe that transitional housing, particularly projects linked to permanent supportive housing, must be eligible for Proposition 41 funding. We understand the preference for Housing First, but Housing First without supportive services for veterans with mental health issues and substance abuse issues is a recipe for long-term disaster. Transitional housing is an important first step for veterans willing and able to deal with their issues and should be an important part of the Proposition 41 strategy going forward.

VASH Vouchers: Finally, I again want to raise the issue of funding for supportive services. Proposition 41 does not provide supportive services funding and we have a very significant gap in funding for supportive services funding. Much of our supportive services funding for permanent housing projects comes from HUD VASH Vouchers. But California's allocation of vouchers falls far short of our needs, particularly for new Proposition 41 projects. Simply stated, we need HUD and VA to recognize California's commitment for housing under Proposition 41, by providing California with a new allocation of vouchers for Proposition 41 projects. CAVSA is currently working with HUD and VA in an effort to get a more VASH Vouchers approved for California, but we will also need the Legislature and Brown Administration's support in this advocacy effort! We hope this committee will also support our efforts!

Thanks you for this opportunity and I look forward to any questions!

