

## MEMORANDUM

TO: Regional Steering Committee on Homelessness and Housing

FROM: HomeBase

RE: Ending Homelessness Among Veterans within Five Years

DATE: November 16, 2009

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### **BACKGROUND:**

The United States Department of Veterans' Affairs (VA) estimates that approximately 131,000 Veterans are homeless on any given night, and that perhaps twice as many experience homelessness at some point during the course of a year. Although the number of homeless Veterans has appeared to decrease in recent years, many attribute this to refinements in count methodology rather than an actual decrease in the numbers of homeless Veterans. In fact, the VA estimates that the number of Veterans experiencing homelessness could increase by as much as 10 to 15 percent in the next five years as a result of current economic conditions. To put the problem of homelessness among Veterans into perspective, consider that the number of homeless Vietnam-era Veterans is currently greater than the number of service persons who died during that war.

In light of the large number of veterans experiencing homelessness, the Regional Steering Committee on Homelessness and Housing (RSC) has generally reviewed Veterans' issues at least once a year. For example, in April 2007 the RSC devoted a significant portion of its quarterly meeting to homelessness among Veterans from the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, who appear to be becoming homeless much sooner following their tours of duty than Veterans of other wars. In other meetings, the Network Homeless Coordinator for VISN 21, Roberta Rosenthal, has presented information concerning current developments, the VA's structure, funding opportunities, and programs available to homeless veterans in Northern California.

RSC members have addressed Veterans' issues from a variety of perspectives, ranging from federal policy-level discussion to practical advice about best practices for accessing benefits and navigating backlog under the current system. This memorandum will provide useful background information concerning the VA's preliminary plans to end homelessness among Veterans, which may be used to spark healthy policy debate and/or guide eventual implementation planning. The RSC will likely revisit the VA plan at future meetings, as specific plan details are released.

### **Veteran's Programs in the Area**

The VA Sierra Pacific Network (VISN 21) is one of 21 Veterans Integrated Service Networks

in the Veterans Health Administration (VHA). It serves 1.2 million veterans residing in northern and central California, northern Nevada, Hawaii, the Philippines, and several Pacific Islands including Guam and American Samoa.

The seven VA medical centers/health systems listed below manage a total of thirty-six care sites:

- VA Central California Health Care System (HCS)
- VA Northern California Health Care System
- VA Pacific Islands Health Care System
- VA Palo Alto Health Care System
- VA Medical Center (VAMC), San Francisco
- VA Sierra Nevada Health Care System
- VA Regional Office/Outpatient Clinic (VARO/OC), Manila

#### *VA Northern California Health Care System*

VA Northern California Health Care System (VANCHCS) is an integrated health care delivery system, offering a comprehensive array of medical, surgical, rehabilitative, mental health and extended care to veterans in Northern California. The health system is comprised of a medical center in Sacramento; a rehabilitation and extended care facility in Martinez, and seven outpatient clinics.

VANCHCS has two divisions: The Sacramento Valley Division is comprised of medical facilities in Sacramento, Chico and Redding; The East Bay Division is comprised of medical facilities in Fairfield, Vallejo, Martinez and Oakland.

#### *VA Medical Center, San Francisco*

San Francisco VAMC services are available to more than 310,000 veterans living in an 8-county area of Northern California.

In addition to the main facility in San Francisco, services are offered in five community-based outpatient clinics. These clinics are located in downtown San Francisco, Eureka, San Bruno, Santa Rosa and Ukiah.

The San Francisco VA Downtown Clinic offers a wide range of psychosocial and health care services. The Downtown Clinic is one of 43 Department of Veterans Affairs program sites for homeless veterans. This Comprehensive Homeless Center offers extensive programs that include outreach, therapy, housing and employment.

## Comprehensive Homeless Center

Programs offered at the Comprehensive Homeless Center in San Francisco include:

- ◆ The Compensated Work Therapy (CWT) Program provides clinical and behavioral services in a work-focused program. Veterans receive case management, individual and vocational counseling and are enrolled in appropriate treatment programs. Contracts are set up with local businesses for veterans to work on-site while still benefiting from the therapeutic component of the CWT program.
- ◆ The Therapeutic Residence component of this program places veterans in a supportive housing situation with other veterans. There they learn valuable skills in cooperation, budgeting, relapse prevention and daily living. This is a time-limited program with a goal of assisting the veteran to move on to permanent employment and housing.
- ◆ The Health Care for Homeless Veterans (HCHV) offers goal-oriented treatment and stabilization services to homeless veterans. The goal of HCHV is to link veterans to appropriate treatment and social services.

### *VA Palo Alto Health Care System*

The VA Palo Alto Health Care System (VAPAHCS) consists of three inpatient facilities located at Palo Alto, Menlo Park, and Livermore, plus six outpatient clinics in San Jose, Capitola, Monterey, Stockton, Modesto, and Sonora. VAPAHCS operates nearly 900 beds, including three nursing homes and a 100-bed homeless domiciliary - all to serve more than 85,000 enrolled veterans.

VAPAHCS is home to a variety of regional treatment centers, including a Polytrauma Rehabilitation Center, Spinal Cord Injury Center, a Comprehensive Rehabilitation Center, a Traumatic Brain Injury Center, the Western Blind Rehabilitation Center, a Geriatric Research Educational and Clinical Center, a Homeless Veterans Rehabilitation program, and the National Center for Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

### *Swords to Plowshares*

Swords to Plowshares is the only veterans service agency in the United States that provides a full continuum of care to low-income and homeless veterans. They do not discriminate based on length of service, branch of service or military discharge status. Services include:

- ◆ **Front-Line Drop-In Center:** Provides mental health services, including counseling for drug and alcohol problems and PTSD, as well as case management, income advocacy

and referrals.

- ◆ **Supportive Housing:** Permanent supportive housing combined with options for counseling, academic instruction and vocational training for 100 formerly homeless disabled veterans. Also transitional housing for 75 veterans at a time for intensive individual, group and peer counseling and a variety of recreational, cultural and community-building activities. Both housing programs provide daily hot meals to residents.
- ◆ **Employment Support:** Swords to Plowshares helps veterans make the transition to gainful employment by offering vocational counseling, life-skills training, resume preparation and job referrals.
- ◆ **Legal Services:** Many veterans never apply for or receive the benefits they deserve. Swords to Plowshares is one of the few organizations in the country that provides free attorney representation, case management and advocacy to indigent veterans seeking benefits.

### *HUD's Veterans Affairs Supportive Housing Program*

HUD's Veterans Affairs Supportive Housing Program (HUD-VASH) provides local public housing agencies with rental assistance vouchers specifically targeted to assist homeless veterans in their area. Public housing authorities, that administer HUD's Housing Choice Voucher Program (HCV), work closely with Veteran Affairs Medical Centers to manage the program. In addition to the rental assistance, VA Medical Centers provide supportive services and case management to eligible homeless veterans.

HUD allocates the housing vouchers to local public housing agencies across the country that are specifically targeted to homeless veterans based on a variety of factors, including the number of reported homeless veterans and the proximity of a local VA Medical Center with the capacity to provide case management. HUD's HCV program (Section 8) allows participants to rent privately owned housing and generally pay no more than 30 percent of annual adjusted income. The VA offers eligible homeless veterans clinical and supportive services through its medical centers across the U.S and Puerto Rico.

In the last two years, HUD has provided \$150 million that will sustain 20,000 vouchers to support the housing and service needs of homeless veterans across America.

Local Continuums of Care work with local VA Medical Centers to identify eligible participants. The VA then screens homeless veterans to determine their eligibility. Those eligible vets receive treatment and regular case management to retain the voucher. VA Medical Center case managers also work closely with local housing agencies to help participants find suitable housing. Participating local housing agencies also determine income eligibility in accordance to HUD regulations for the HCV program.

In our area, the following communities received HUD VASH vouchers in 2009:

Santa Clara 105  
San Francisco 70  
Oakland 105  
Contra Costa 35  
Sacramento 70  
Santa Rosa 35  
Monterey 35  
Marin 35  
San Joaquin 35  
Tulare 35  
Fresno 35

### **OVERVIEW OF THE VA'S 5-YEAR SOLUTION TO VETERANS' HOMELESSNESS:**

VA Secretary Eric Shineski recently announced a Five-Year Plan to eradicate homelessness among Veterans. During a recent summit in Washington, DC focused on the issue, he outlined some of the Plan's broad contours and noted that specific details will be forthcoming. The Plan will assist currently homeless Veterans to obtain housing and services. It will also devote as much, if not more, resources towards preventing homelessness for those who are at-risk of losing housing. The focus on preventing homelessness is a new, highly significant shift in the VA's approach to assisting Veterans, and is consistent with the direction that other federal agencies addressing homelessness are moving.

Under its Five-Year Plan, the VA will continue to expand its current programs through increased spending, leveraging the full range of VA benefits, and expanding its collaborations with public and private partners. In recent years the VA has quadrupled its investment in the Homeless Providers Grant and Per Diem Program to nearly 500 programs across the country. This program provides transitional housing and supportive services to homeless Veterans for up to 24 months. During the same timeframe, the Homeless Veterans Reintegration program has more than tripled in capacity to serve homeless Veterans, and has become one of the most successful employment assistance programs offered by the Department of Labor. In addition, the VA has placed Health Care for Homeless Veterans coordinators at virtually every VA medical center in the nation.

The VA plans to build upon these successes. In FY 2010, the VA will spend \$3.2 billion to prevent and reduce homelessness among Veterans - \$2.7 billion will be dedicated to providing medical services and \$500 million will be spent on specific homeless programs. In its 2010 budget, the VA plans to add \$93 million in homeless-specific funding, an increase of nearly 23% over 2009. The increased spending includes significant augmentation of funding for contract residential care. Approximately \$25 million is expected to be made available for case management for low-income Veterans and financial

#### **VA Spending in FY 2010 to Implement the Plan**

- \$3.2 billion spent to reduce or prevent Veterans' homelessness
  - \$2.7 billion for medical services
  - \$500 million for homeless-specific programs
    - \$93 million in new funds

counseling services. The VA will also prioritize reducing the backlog in processing Veterans' benefits claims that delays people from accessing necessary medical services and receiving income benefits to which they are entitled.

The VA's Five-Year Plan has six "strategic pillars."

- (1) Outreach;
- (2) Treatment;
- (3) Employment and Benefits;
- (4) Community Partnerships;
- (5) Prevention; and
- (6) Housing and supportive services for low-income Veterans.

Many of the first four pillars have been in development for more than 20 years. The latter two are new areas of engagement for the VA. In line with these strategic focuses, the VA will direct staff efforts, funding, and other resources towards supporting Veterans in several key areas:

### ***Housing***

As part of its 5-Year Plan, the VA will work to create additional housing for Veterans. Currently there are over 16,000 transitional housing beds for Veterans across the country, including 1,155 new beds funded in October 2009 with more than \$17 million in new VA grants. Over 20,000 homeless Veterans will access this existing network of housing in FY 2010. The VA will immediately begin to expand its housing and supportive services contract portfolio, and will continue to augment it over the next five years in order to develop the capacity to provide assistance to Veterans in need within 24 hours. To accomplish this the VA will, among other things, significantly increase funding for successful community-based transitional housing programs under the Homeless Providers Grant and Per Diem Program.

Furthermore, in collaboration with the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), the VA will expand the HUD-VASH program. HUD and the VA provided 10,150 HUD-VASH vouchers for homeless Veterans in 2008. HUD-VASH II, which was approved in 2009 for implementation in 2010, will provide 10,290 additional vouchers. HUD-VASH vouchers can be used to provide housing for homeless veterans with serious mental illness and other disabilities, as well as housing for extreme low-income Veterans with dependent children. In addition, the HUD-VASH program provides supportive services to assist eligible Veterans and their families remain in permanent housing by reducing their risks of becoming homeless.

Also in partnership with HUD, the VA will participate in 12 pilot programs to demonstrate the effectiveness and efficiencies of linking housing with supportive services to ensure that low-income Veterans who served in Iraq and Afghanistan, and their families, remained stably housed.

## ***Education***

The VA plans to encourage and assist Veterans to take advantage of the new Post 9/11 GI Bill, which provides financial support for education and housing to individuals with at least 90 days of aggregate military service on or after September 11, 2001. It will also extend similar benefits to vocational training programs for those interested in learning a trade rather than obtaining a four-year college degree.

## ***Employment***

The 5-Year Plan will also emphasize jobs by putting Veterans first in hiring and contracting. Currently, 30% of VA employees are Veterans. The VA will also ensure that it prioritizes Veteran-owned businesses in its contracting awards. In FY 2008, the VA awarded \$1.65 billion in contracts to service-disabled Veteran-owned small businesses. It intends to raise these numbers in the coming year by collaborating with the Small Business Administration to certify Veteran-owned small businesses and service-disabled Veteran-owned small businesses for listing on the Federal Supply Register, improving their visibility and enhancing their competitiveness for federal supply contracts. The VA will also encourage other federal agencies to exceed the minimum goal of awarding 3% of contracts to service-disabled Veterans.

Supporting Veteran-owned business to survive and thrive is a key component of the 5-Year Plan because it will likely increase the overall employment rate of Veterans given that Veterans often hire other Veterans.

## ***Health Care***

Of the \$3.2 billion in FY 2010 that the VA has allocated to prevent or reduce Veterans' homelessness, \$2.7 billion (approximately 85%) will be spent on medical services. The VA is directing such significant resources to medical care because it recognizes that homelessness is very often linked with significant health care issues, such as depression and substance abuse. In particular, the VA will train resources to address the psychological wounds of war that affect every generation of Veterans, such as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. The VA is committed to aggressively diagnosing and treating these health concerns and addressing other portions of the downward spiral that result in severe isolation; dysfunctional behaviors; losses of identity, confidence, and personal direction; shattered relationships; depression; and substance abuse.

## ***Discharge Planning***

In collaboration with the Department of Labor, the VA will be launching new initiatives to assist institutionalized Veterans upon discharge from incarceration or long-term psychiatric care. The VA will invest resources to assist the nearly 40,000 veterans released from prison each year and those leaving long-term mental health treatment facilities to improve their transitions into independent living. These Veterans will have increased access to essential health care, including mental health and treatment for substance abuse,

assistance finding gainful employment, and other reintegration support that will prevent re-institutionalization or homelessness.

### ***National Referral Center***

The VA will also soon begin to operate a National Call and Referral Center. It will be staffed 24 hours a day, seven days a week by trained staff who will be able to connect Veterans with those in their communities who can assist them to avoid or end their homelessness. It will be a resource for Veterans in crisis, as well as supportive service providers and VA healthcare providers throughout the country.

### **NEXT STEPS:**

Successful implementation of the Five-Year Plan may depend on two key bills currently pending in Congress that would directly impact the delivery of services to homeless and at-risk Veterans, and assist the VA to achieve its goal of ending Veterans' homelessness.

#### *Zero Tolerance for Veterans Homelessness Act of 2009 (S. 1547)*

In July 2009, Senators Reed (D-RI) and Bond (R-MO) introduced the *Zero Tolerance for Veterans Homelessness Act of 2009*, S. 1547. The Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs reviewed the legislation in a hearing on October 21, 2009. The Act would create a new homelessness prevention and rapid re-housing program within the VA, expand and improve the Homeless Veterans Grant and Per Diem program, and authorize funding for a significant number of new HUD-VASH vouchers. There is not yet a companion bill in the House of Representatives, but the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs is considering several separate bills that address homelessness, some with similar provisions to S. 1547.

#### *Homes for Heroes Act of 2009 (H.R. 403 / S. 1160)*

The *Homes for Heroes Act of 2009*, H.R. 403 / S. 1160, passed overwhelmingly in the House of Representatives and has been introduced in the Senate by Senator Schumer (D-NY). The legislation would create a HUD-sponsored program that will fund the development and operating costs of permanent housing for low-income veterans and their families. S. 1160 has been referred to the Senate Committee on Banking, Housing, and Urban Affairs.

- What more would you like to know about both Acts?
- Are you willing to:
  - Contact your elected representatives to voice your support?
  - Attend a local meeting of Continuum of Care and the VA? (See attached)
- What other actions would you like to take on this issue?
- What help do you need regarding veterans and homelessness?

*For more information, please contact Jason Satterfield, HomeBase Staff Attorney,*

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