

**Testimony of
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**Before the Senate Committee on Aging
Hearing on Health Issues Affecting Aging Veterans**

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Thank you, Chairman Kohl, Ranking Member Smith, and the honorable members of this committee on behalf of our Board of Directors and partner members for providing this opportunity to address the committee on homelessness among veterans in the United States. I would like to start by congratulating this committee on its interest in addressing the need of homeless and other vulnerable veterans in our nation. The National Alliance to End Homelessness believes that ending homelessness among veterans is well within our reach. The population is small enough for our collective effort to eradicate this deplorable existence for men and women who have served our country.

The National Alliance to End Homelessness is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization that was founded in 1983 by a group of leaders deeply disturbed by the appearance of thousands of Americans living on the streets of our nation. We have committed ourselves to finding permanent solutions to homelessness. Our bipartisan Board of Directors and our 5,000 nonprofit, faith-based, private and public sector partners across the country devote ourselves to the affordable housing, access to services, and livable incomes that will end homelessness. The Alliance is recognized for its organization and dissemination of evidence-based research to encourage best practices and high standards in the field of homelessness prevention and intervention and we wish to share our insights with you today.

As our name implies, our primary focus is ending homelessness, not simply making it easier to live with. We take this idea very seriously. There is nothing inevitable about homelessness among veterans in the United States. We know more about veteran homelessness and how to address it than we ever have before, thanks in part to extensive research. We know a great deal about the pathways into homelessness, the characteristics of veterans who experience homelessness, and interventions and program models which are effective in offering reconnection to community, and stable housing.

We have been asked today to summarize the research available on the size and characteristics of the problem, and the most promising solutions that are under implementation around the country.

Homelessness Among Veterans

Far too many veterans are homeless in America. Homeless veterans can be found in every state across the country and live in rural, suburban, and urban communities. Many have lived on the streets for years, while others live on the edge of homelessness, struggling to pay their rent. Serious health problems and disabilities are both a cause and an effect of homelessness, and as is true of veterans generally, the homeless veteran population is aging – it is generally accepted that homeless veterans are older and more likely to have disabilities than are homeless Americans who are not veterans.

History clearly illustrates that as a nation we need to do more to protect veterans from falling through the cracks and becoming homeless. As the country struggles to resolve the ongoing wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, it is important to underscore the aftereffects of war, to ensure that government policies are supporting troops as they return home, and to do more for veterans who are already homeless.

A forthcoming research report (November 2007) from our Homelessness Research Institute analyzes data from the Department of Veterans Affairs and the Census Bureau to examine homelessness and severe housing cost burden among veterans. The report will highlight the following findings:

- In 2006, approximately 195,827 veterans were homeless on a given night—an increase of 0.8 percent from 194,254 in 2005. More veterans experience homelessness over the course of the year. We estimate that 495,400 spent some time homeless over the course of 2006.
- Veterans make up a disproportionate share of homeless people. They represent roughly 26 percent of homeless people, but only 11 percent of the civilian population 18 years and older. This is true despite the fact that veterans are better educated, more likely to be employed, and have a lower poverty rate than the general population.
- A number of states, including Louisiana, California, and Missouri had high rates of homelessness among veterans. In addition, the District of Columbia had a high rate of homelessness among veterans with approximately 7.5 percent of veterans experiencing homelessness.
- In 2005 approximately 44,000 to 64,000 veterans were chronically homeless (i.e., homeless for long periods or repeatedly and with a disability).
- In 2005, nearly half a million (467,877) veterans were severely rent burdened and were paying more than 50 percent of their income for rent.
- More than half (55 percent) of veterans with severe housing cost burden fell below the poverty level and 43 percent were receiving food stamps.

- Rhode Island, California, Nevada, and Hawaii were the states with the highest percentage of veterans with severe housing cost burden. The District of Columbia had the highest rate, with 6.5 percent of veterans paying more than 50 percent of their income toward rent.
- Female veterans, those with a disability, and unmarried or separated veterans were more likely to experience severe housing cost burden. There are also differences by period of service, with older veterans who served during the Korean War and WWII more likely to have severe housing cost burdens.
- In 2005, approximately 89,553 to 467,877 veterans were at risk of homelessness. At risk is defined as being below the poverty level and paying more than 50 percent of household income on rent. It also includes households with a member who has a disability, a person living alone, and those who are not in the labor force.

A state-by-state count of homeless veterans, and percent of all veterans who are homeless, is attached at the end of this testimony.

Communities are working to end homelessness among veterans. Across the country, thousands of stakeholders—policymakers, advocates, researchers, practitioners, former and currently homeless people, community leaders, and concerned citizens—have joined together to create 10-year plans to end homelessness. While most plans are geared toward ending homelessness among *all* people, many outline strategies that focus on meeting the targeted needs of homeless veterans. Strategies to end homelessness among veterans include more aggressive outreach targeted to veterans, greater coordination between local VA and homeless service agencies, targeted rental subsidies for veterans who are chronically homeless, permanent supportive housing that is linked to mental health services and other supports. While some communities are making progress, challenges remain daunting.

Federal Policy Response

There are a number of steps the federal government could take to reduce the number of veterans who experience homelessness.

Prevention of homelessness -- Using basic measures, our analysis shows that a high number of veterans are at risk of homelessness. To end homelessness among veterans, we have to prevent it from occurring in the first place.

Assessment and discharge planning -- Everyone leaving active duty should receive basic information about housing and the resources available through the VA, and be assessed for risk of homelessness. Those with characteristics associated with risk of homelessness should receive more extensive discharge planning, including referral to existing housing resources and coordination with local VA offices to ensure follow-up support for stable housing.

Emergency prevention/rapid rehousing – The VA needs flexible resources to intervene when veterans are on the verge of homelessness. Payment of back rent, help with employment and benefits to improve incomes, mediation with property owners or roommates, or assistance with searching for new living options are among the services that need to be available. Outreach to veterans needs to take place to ensure that they know about available resources.

Housing homeless veterans – For veterans who are already homeless, procedures should be established within the VA to ensure a crisis response to return them to housing. For many homeless veterans, the emergency prevention/rapid rehousing approach outlined above will be all that is needed. Other veterans, particularly those with disabilities, will need more intensive supportive services and/or treatment to stabilize their housing.

Permanent supportive housing -- Approximately 44,000 to 66,000 veterans are chronically homeless. Homeless veterans who have been on the streets for a long time, have severe physical or mental disabilities, or have chronic substance abuse problems will need permanent supportive housing—housing linked with intensive supports—to help them maintain housing stability. A number of research studies show that permanent supportive housing is a cost effective approach that helps people who have intensive needs maintain stable housing, and some evidence shows that once back in housing they are likely to access health and substance abuse treatment. Supportive housing requires funding for operating costs, services, and capital costs.

HUD-VASH vouchers – The existing HUD-VA Supportive Housing program provides rent vouchers from HUD for homeless veterans, combined with treatment, case management and supportive services from the VA. This is a proven program that provides housing stability for veterans with the most severe disabilities. Ending homelessness for these veterans can be accomplished with the addition of 20,000 of these vouchers; the Senate T-HUD appropriation bill would provide for \$75 million for this purpose next year, enough to house approximately 8,000 veterans.

Services for HUD-VASH – The HUD-VASH program requires that the VA have resources available to provide the case management, treatment and support services that are a key part of this intervention. Funded through VA Health Care, an amount approximately equal to the appropriation from HUD will be necessary.

Treatment and services through nonprofits – A number of bills over the past two years have sought to authorize the VA to provide grants to nonprofits, community-based organizations to provide supportive services to veterans with the lowest income, including those who have been homeless, who are now in permanent housing. In addition, the Services

for Ending Longterm Homelessness Act, S. 593, would provide funding for this purpose for all homeless people including veterans. Nonprofits have proven to be effective in this role.

Capital for supportive housing – To the extent that supportive housing for veterans requires the production of new housing stock or the rehabilitation of existing buildings that are not fit for habitation, there is a need for an authorized program to provide capital funds.

Homeless Grant and Per Diem upgrade for transitional housing – For veterans whose disabilities are not so severe that they need permanent supportive housing, but do need a stable living situation combined with supportive services for a period of time up to two years, transitional housing is a proven model, especially effective for homeless veterans who are working to overcome addiction. The Homeless Grant and Per Diem program provides VA funds to nonprofits to run transitional housing for homeless veterans. The program has achieved positive results. It is not, however, funded at a level sufficient to meet the need, as demonstrated in a recent GAO study. Congress should increase funding to \$170 million for FY 2008 and \$200 million for FY 2009.

More housing options – It is crucial that federal resources focus on veterans who are homeless now, and on those who are on the brink of falling into homelessness. At the same time, this problem requires a commitment that decent housing will be something that all veterans can count on, just as health care through the VA is something they can count on now. Access to permanent housing is consistently the number one service need identified by those concerned with veteran issues (VA staff, community providers, local government agencies, public officials, and former and currently homeless veterans themselves). Further, reports indicate that veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan are seeking help with housing sooner than past cohorts of veterans. Congress should consider options for providing comprehensive housing assistance to all veterans who need it.

Monitoring and managing progress – The VA must take the initiative to monitor the progress of communities across the country at ending homelessness among veterans. It has a data system that is capable of tracking use of the veterans' health care system by veterans who are homeless, which would allow it to target resources to those whose health is the worst. The issue must be regarded as a critical priority.

Homelessness Among Veterans by State

State	Homeless Veterans 2005	Homeless Veterans 2006	Total Veterans 2005	% of Veterans Who Are Homeless
AK	450	600	74,482	0.6
AL	816	824	403,950	0.2
AR	1,350	850	259,304	0.52
AZ	3,637	3,970	538,880	0.67
CA	49,546	49,724	2,193,336	2.26
CO	3,895	1,203	402,091	0.97
CT	4,675	5,000	261,294	1.79
DC	2,400	2,500	31,959	7.51
DE	500	550	79,151	0.63
FL	19,394	18,910	1,717,801	1.13
GA	5,715	3,297	731,466	0.78
HI	800	800	116,793	0.68
IA	600	547	249,911	0.24
ID	350	500	132,844	0.26
IL	2,243	2,197	853,338	0.26
IN	1,300	1,200	505,259	0.26
KS	620	601	238,506	0.26
KY	963	425	341,752	0.28
LA	10,897	9,950	331,822	3.28
MA	1,680	1,700	453,249	0.37
MD	3,100	3,300	480,654	0.64
ME	120	100	145,352	0.08
MI	3,110	3,513	782,823	0.4
MN	493	523	407,255	0.12
MO	4,800	3,325	226,398	2.12
MS	1,136	1,579	533,517	0.21
MT	247	232	100,637	0.25
NC	1,601	1,659	723,831	0.22
ND	1,000	1,000	58,479	1.71
NE	460	770	154,607	0.3
NH	350	257	129,603	0.27
NJ	6,500	6,500	546,437	1.19
NM	902	860	177,687	0.51
NV	4,600	4,715	233,633	1.97
NY	12,700	21,147	1,098,272	1.16
OH	1,698	1,710	982,418	0.17
OK	770	500	314,464	0.24
OR	6,940	5,891	350,365	1.98
PA	2,691	2,784	1,088,379	0.25
PR	75	80	135,988	0.06
RI	175	175	88,971	0.2
SC	1,375	1,375	400,152	0.34
SD	165	170	400,152	0.04
TN	2,515	2,844	509,881	0.49

State	Homeless Veterans 2005	Homeless Veterans 2006	Total Veterans 2005	% of Veterans Who Are Homeless
TX	15,434	15,967	1,612,948	0.96
UT	585	530	143,301	0.41
VA	911	870	757,224	0.12
VT	20	30	57,633	0.03
WA	6,567	6,800	628,595	1.04
WI	915	828	444,679	0.2
WV	357	347	175,697	0.2
WY	111	98	55,519	0.2