



Committee on General Welfare Jointly with the Committee on Veterans

Update on the City's Efforts to End Veterans' Homelessness

November 12, 2015

Introduction

My name is Gilbert Taylor and I am the Commissioner of the Department of Homeless Services (DHS). Thank you for the opportunity to present testimony regarding the City's efforts to end Veterans' Homelessness. I am extremely proud of the work that our City is doing to support veterans touched by our system.

Veterans are men and women who have made a conscious choice to put the needs of our country above all else. There are more than 210,000 veterans living in New York City, and we owe them our deepest gratitude. They do so much and ask for so little in return. At the very least, ensuring that they are securely housed should be our nation's obligation to them. And the City is doing its part. In fact I am proud that since January 2014, we have reduced the veteran street homeless population to eight.

On March 28, 2014, the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs launched a 25 Cities Initiative to end veteran homelessness by the end of 2015. The Initiative was designed to help communities with high concentrations of homeless veterans intensify and integrate their local efforts. New York City, under the leadership of Mayor de Blasio, signed on immediately, and we have been working tirelessly to meet this goal through an effort entitled "Mission Home." New York City is striving to end homelessness for all our veterans, including those on the streets and in shelters. The Mission Home campaign is focused on ending



veterans' homelessness and aligning outreach, services, and resources to ensure that New York City's veterans receive the comprehensive assistance needed to move into their own home. Our mission is to ensure that every veteran has a home. Ending veterans' homelessness is a top priority for DHS and we are collaborating with the Mayor's Office on Veteran's Affairs (MOVA), Housing Preservation and Development (HPD), New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA), the Human Resource Administration (HRA), and the United States Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) on every step of this journey. DHS and MOVA are in daily communication strategizing on ways to reduce the numbers of homeless veterans in our system, discussing individual cases, and organizing new ways to maximize the number of veterans we place into permanent housing. This partnership is crucial and represents the City's collaborative effort to end veterans' homelessness.

One result of this collaboration was recognizing that the best way for the City to help veterans, was to bring veterans onto our team through an evidenced based-model that has been successful elsewhere. Veteran Peer Coordinators provide veterans with additional individualized support and assistance in their search for permanent housing. These are veterans who have successfully reintegrated into society and want to use their experience to help other veterans who are experiencing hardship. They engage vets on how best to interview for apartments and jobs, travel with them to appointments, and advocate specifically to potential landlords on their behalf. They receive extensive training on all the various housing placements the City offers and attend veterans' summits across the City. They work nights and weekends and do whatever it takes to make sure veterans are placed, and just as importantly, they serve as a resource after placement to help the veteran reintegrate smoothly into their new home and community. For veterans



who need extra clinical support, and are wary of leaving shelter, we have hired licensed social workers that can engage these individuals and help place them into the housing that is most appropriate for their needs.

Veterans who are experiencing homelessness, just like all homeless New Yorkers, are impacted by economic forces that affect New York City and the economic inequality that we see every day in our system. Low wages, lack of affordable housing, and the increased cost of living, combined with social traumas such as domestic violence and discord are causing many New Yorkers, veterans included, to find themselves in very difficult situations that no one should have to experience. Furthermore, in many cases veterans are burdened with the emotional scars brought on by the trauma related to combat and need enhanced social services so that they can properly reintegrate into their home communities. The mental health challenges associated with this population can make it additionally challenging to find appropriate housing. This Mayor and Administration are committed to tackling these issues head on, ensuring that all veterans in our City are connected to quality care, services and resources and most importantly, for our purposes, a home they can call their own.

The Executive Budget for FY16 includes approximately \$150 million across more than a dozen agencies for programs and services that benefit veterans and their families with more than \$57 million for housing programs. I am happy to announce that we are seeing real results from this multi-faceted approach. Our efforts are making a real difference in the lives of the men and women we serve.



Employing a systematic approach, in the last five years we have reduced the overall number of homeless veterans from 4,677 in 2011, to 847 today, an 80-percent decrease. This decrease is even more notable when you consider that since January 1, 2014, 2,466 veterans have entered shelter. New York City differs from other municipalities by having a right to shelter mandate. So as we rapidly exit existing veterans, new veterans enter the system. We are using every resource at our disposal to rapidly rehouse these veterans and return them to the community and we will ensure that even after all of our existing clients are housed, future clients will be rapidly rehoused and will leave shelter within 90 days.

Prevention Services

Prevention is a cornerstone of DHS' efforts across our system. We believe that shelter must be a last resort and have naturally extended this principal to our work with veterans. The most effective way to end veteran homelessness is to stop it before it begins. Our Homebase Prevention Program is nationally recognized and has been proven to be 95-percent effective in helping those who are enrolled in the program to remain stably housed and remain in their own community.

In FY 2016, DHS-Prevention Services approved \$400,000 to implement Homelessness Prevention Programs for veterans via Ridgewood Bushwick Senior Citizen's Council-Homebase (RBSCC). This program is targeting 100 veterans in the community with shelter histories who are most at-risk of homelessness. By creating a high risk profile for these veterans who might re-enter the system we can provide them with any help that they may need before their situation becomes dire. This preventative model enables individuals to remain stably housed in their community.



DHS has also approved \$500,000 to implement a Rapid Rehousing (RR) program to support veterans presenting for “Re-Entry” or as a “New Entrant” into the shelter system. This new model is slightly different from our normal preventative measures as it targets veterans entering shelter with enhanced services. Rapid Rehousing is a promising evidence-informed and short-term practice model and a key Prevention Services strategy to support ending veteran homelessness. The core practices include housing identification, financial assistance for rent and moving costs and case management services. It is part of the City’s efforts to ensure that any veteran who enters the system can be successfully placed into permanent housing as quickly as possible.

Street Outreach

In addition to prevention, DHS is committed to serving all unsheltered veterans in the city and our results with veterans in this area have been truly remarkable. We have reduced veteran street homelessness from 329 to eight. We have achieved this success through intensive casework and by closely partnering with the VA, which offers coordinated medical services to individuals on the street. Relationship building is the key to outreach work and we are fortunate to have teams of incredibly patient and compassionate individuals who are on the streets each day making connections and assisting veterans who want help moving into permanent housing

One story of a veteran that I’d like to share is about a gentleman named Ian. For two years, Ian lived on the streets of New York City. He wondered how he’d be able to find a job and rent an apartment. After connecting with an outreach worker, he found comfort and support at a safe haven. From there, with the



help of the compassionate, dedicated staff, he was able to move into permanent housing. Ian's story is a great example of how outreach workers can connect with unsheltered veterans and begin to lead them on the path to permanency.

Housing Permanency

DHS' commitment is to find permanent housing for all of the 847 veterans who are currently in our system and rapidly rehouse any new veterans who may need our help. Nearly 600 veterans currently have a housing voucher in hand and are actively seeking housing. Of those with vouchers in hand, approximately 300 have been linked to specific apartments and are currently in the leasing process. We are tracking every single veteran within our system and have housing plans assigned to them based on their individualized needs. In the past year alone we have placed 900 veterans into permanent housing. We are committed to using every program in our arsenal to ensure that veterans exit shelter and return to the community.

However, as we have seen, it takes a true partnership between the public and private sectors to find homes for all the homeless in our system. We are thankful to all the landlords in New York City who are performing an act of patriotism by renting apartments to veterans. To further encourage this partnership, the City has recently launched an online and print public awareness campaign recruiting New York City landlords to participate in the Mission Home Program.

This additional outreach is needed as we do this work at a time when the affordable housing market has a vacancy rate of three percent. Even with subsidies, it is a challenge to find apartments. Not surprisingly



this is greatly limiting, and is a problem that is unique to New York when compared to other cities with vacancy rates that are far more substantial.

However, there are landlords who are giving back. One such landlord with whom we have successfully partnered is Christine from Staten Island. We were able to connect with Christine through our small landlord campaign. Christine wanted to rent to a veteran and was very excited when she was matched with Antonio as she instantly knew she wanted him as a tenant. In Christine's words, Antonio is respectful, quiet, and a pleasure to house. Now that Antonio has stable housing, he is working as an outreach counselor assisting other veterans. Christine had such a positive experience with Mission Home that she is renting her second vacancy to another veteran. She says she feels blessed to be able to help veterans and wants to work with us in the future; and we as a City are fortunate to have landlords such as Christine using their resources to help veterans in need.

There are multiple ways that veterans within the system can access housing like the kind that Christine was able to offer. With the appropriate discharge status from the military, veterans are able to access HUD-VASH vouchers as well as Support Services for Veteran Families (SSVF). In the event that a veteran cannot access VA rental assistance programming, they have access to a variety of City rental assistance programs for homeless individuals that began in September 2014. These programs are called Living in Communities or LINC. There are six targeted programs for rental assistance that veterans can access including offerings for working families, those who are chronically homeless, families with a survivor of domestic violence, seniors, working single adults, and single adults who may be able to rent a room from a friend or family member.



In addition to the DHS rental assistance programs, there are other rental assistance offerings available to all veterans. These include: CityFEPS, CitySEPS, NYCHA Housing, HPD & NYCHA Section 8, Supportive Housing, and MRT.

Recognizing the unique status of veterans, DHS has implemented several incentives to support this effort so that landlords like Christine can be appropriately compensated for their willingness to partner with the City. We have created many incentive programs to help find the housing placements for veterans including:

- A 15-percent Broker Bonus to those who successfully place veterans,
- Cash Incentives for Landlords for every apartment and commercial SRO with a one-year lease signed by a homeless veteran, and
- Bonuses to Supportive Housing Providers for each unit that they rent to a veteran with a voucher.

In addition, all veterans who are housed receive comprehensive aftercare services through the Supportive Services for Veteran Families (SSVF) to ensure that even after they are placed in permanent housing they can still access services to keep them stably housed. And if for some reason a veteran is not eligible for SSVF services, Samaritan Village, through a grant from the Robin Hood Foundation, provides the same services at no cost to the participant.

This way landlords like Christine will continue to work with the City and clients like Antonio can stay stably housed.



Conclusion

This Administration deeply cares about all veterans and has made a powerful commitment to provide them with the services they need, including housing. DHS is working very closely with MOVA and various non-profits across the City to ensure that no veteran has to experience homelessness for any prolonged period of time. We will continue to strive for a City in which veterans' homelessness is a relic of another era.