



“A National Commitment to End Veterans’ Homelessness”
U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Veterans’ Affairs
June 3, 2009

Good morning Chairperson Filner and members of the Committee on Veterans’ Affairs. My name is Rob Hess and I am the Commissioner of the New York City Department of Homeless Services (DHS). Thank you for inviting me to share with you the innovative strategies New York City is using to end veterans’ homelessness. I’m pleased to join my colleague, Secretary Carol Adams of Illinois, and the members of the other panels from around the country, and I’m heartened by their dedication to serving the unique needs of homeless veterans. Joining me here at the table is a true hero, Ronald Marte. Ronald returned to us after a tour in Iraq where he served as a communications specialist. With dedication, he recently moved from shelter to a home of his own with the assistance of a Veterans Affairs Supportive Housing voucher and is living a life of independence. I am more proud of him than words can say. As a veteran, myself, I speak from personal experience when I say that we have to do everything we can to ensure that the men and women who serve their country receive the housing, services and supports they need, and are treated with the dignity and respect they deserve.

I’d like to take this opportunity to applaud the leadership of President Obama and Secretary Shinseki on this issue. The President’s Fiscal Year (FY10) budget and the expanded funding to serve veterans, including homeless veterans, contained within it will go a long way towards preventing and ending veterans’ homelessness. As you know, they have set the ambitious goal of preventing and ending veterans’ homelessness for the approximately 150,000 homeless veterans living in this country on any given day. When you consider we are a nation of more than 300 million people, targeting permanent housing for 150,000 seems like a task that is absolutely doable.

This is the right goal for the country. I believe this because in New York City we are already starting to see the success that is possible when there is a strong partnership between the U.S.

Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), the local VA offices and local leaders. This is an issue I'm very passionate about – as a veteran myself, and as someone who has spent my entire career advocating for, creating policy and talking one-on-one with homeless veterans, we cannot stand by and allow our fellow veterans who have served and fought for our country to live on the streets or to call shelter a home.

Before I move forward to describe the work we are doing in New York City, I would like to stress to those who are here today that much of our success was and is as a result of collaboration with many government and nonprofit partners. The model we created did not rely solely on new funding. Through meaningful dialogue with our partners, we learned very quickly that much of the infrastructure was already in place. This realization paved the way for us to work smarter and in true partnership, and ultimately allowed us to reinvest in strategies that would move more homeless veterans into permanent housing. I know that in these tough economic times, any request for new funding can seem daunting, so it is really important to take a critical look at how we use existing resources. Now I'd like to share with you how we have done this in New York City that may be helpful to other localities.

Moving Towards Ending Veterans' Homelessness in New York City

In New York City we are continuously moving toward meeting our goal of ending homelessness for veterans. In fact, from December 2006 to May 2009, we have reduced the number of veterans living in our City's shelters by 60 percent by creating new short-term housing models and other innovative strategies to better serve homeless veterans. However, I would not be able to stand before this committee and tell you of this great success had it not been for the shared commitment of New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg and then U.S Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Secretary James Nicholson. In December 2006, they created the Operation Home Task Force and charged it with creating the blueprint for a new veterans' service system – a dedicated service system outside the traditional homeless services system - that met the unique needs of homeless veterans and tied them to the rich array of resources already provided by the VA.

We were ultimately successful in creating our new veterans' service system because of the partnership between the federal and local VA and the City that this fostered. However, another key to our success was the creation of specific and measurable goals that would transform services for homeless veterans, ones that we continuously held ourselves accountable to. One tangible first step was an intense effort to house 100 veterans in 100 days. We didn't waste a second – as we worked to develop the blueprint, we took immediate action to permanently house homeless veterans. Much of the lessons we learned during this time helped shape our vision and focus for this new system. I am happy to report to this committee that we not only exceeded this goal by housing 135 veterans during the first 100 days but since then we have helped move 1900 veterans from temporary shelter into permanent housing.

The system we created now includes a multi-service center which serves as a single point of access for homeless veterans and for those at-risk of becoming homeless. The Center, which has been up and running since May 2008, integrates DHS intake services exclusively for homeless veterans with access to medical, mental health and substance abuse treatment available through the VA medical system, as well as housing and other support services. The Center also makes available preventive services needed to divert those veterans who are at risk of becoming homeless. To date, over 1,066 homeless veterans have been served by the program.

We will soon open the first veteran-specific Safe Haven, a low-threshold, harm reduction housing model that has proven to be the most effective tool for engaging street homeless clients. Once veterans are placed in a Safe Haven, they will be able to access on-site social services and other supports offered through the VA and various non-profit partners.

And we have transformed a former 410-bed congregate shelter for men into a new short-housing model comprised of 243 individual living units that afford much greater privacy and dignity to the homeless veterans, both men and women, residing in the program than the previous dormitory-style facility. In addition to the case management and medical services provided on-site, eligible veterans also may avail themselves of the full complement of VA medical and social services while in residence.

New York City's efforts to end veterans' homelessness have also been strengthened by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's Veterans Affairs Supportive Housing Program (HUD-VASH). In 2008, a total of \$75 million was announced to provide permanent supportive housing for an estimated 10,000 homeless veterans nationwide. New York City received \$9.4 million of this funding to permanently house 1,000 homeless veterans with HUD-VASH vouchers. I'm happy to report that, as of May 1, 2009, the City has distributed 701 vouchers.

I'd like to take this opportunity to thank you and your colleagues in Congress for your past commitment to this important funding stream. This is a critical resource for veterans, and so I urge you to support additional funding for the HUD-VASH program so that we can all continue to help more veterans avoid homelessness and instead find permanent housing in the community. This is a valuable resource, and we have been successful in serving the most vulnerable veterans through careful targeting and working with the VA to ensure that vouchers are moving veterans to permanency. In addition to supporting the overall funding, one way that this committee can be most helpful in ensuring the success of the program is in making sure that the legislative directives incorporate the notion of targeting to those most in need.

Conclusion

Ending veterans' homelessness is the right goal for New York City and it is the right goal for the nation. We all can do this, but, as in the case of New York City, it will take strong partnerships between both the federal and local VA and the jurisdictional leaders. But I realize that what works in New York City will not work everywhere. There cannot be a one-size-fits-all approach. What works in New York City may not work in Killeen, Texas. And so, these federal-local relationships will need to be developed with flexibility to the needs of each individual locality, and allow them to create their own specific and measurable goals to drive their success. The key component here is that as a locality, we need a strong federal partner to help us bring our initiatives to scale if we are truly to end veterans' homelessness.

Our continued progress in housing and better serving the needs of homeless veterans is a true testament to our strong partnership with both our local and national VA; without their

collaboration from the beginning, this system transformation would not have been possible. Once fully implemented, we believe that this system will serve as national model for permanently ending veterans' homelessness.

I look forward to answering your questions and I stand committed to working with this committee and my colleagues around the country in ending veterans' homelessness once and for all. Thank you.