

**CALL TO ACTION: VA OUTREACH AND  
COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS**

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**HEARING**  
BEFORE THE  
**COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS**  
**UNITED STATES SENATE**  
ONE HUNDRED THIRTEENTH CONGRESS  
FIRST SESSION

APRIL 24, 2013

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APRIL 24, 2013

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## **CALL TO ACTION: VA OUTREACH AND COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS**

**WEDNESDAY, APRIL 24, 2013**

U.S. SENATE,  
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS,  
*Washington, DC.*

The Committee met, pursuant to notice, at 10:02 a.m., in room 418, Russell Senate Office Building, Hon. Bernard Sanders, Chairman of the Committee, presiding.

Present: Senators Sanders, Brown, Tester, Blumenthal and Burr.

### **OPENING STATEMENT OF HON. BERNARD SANDERS, CHAIRMAN, U.S. SENATOR FROM VERMONT**

Chairman SANDERS. Chairman Sanders. Good morning and thank you for coming to what I think is going to be a very informative and important hearing on how the VA and other organizations that work with the VA do outreach.

Before I begin with the substance of this hearing, I do want to make a statement, and that is to point out to Dr. Sowers and to the VA that it is completely unacceptable, with the vast resources of the VA, that they were incapable of submitting their testimony to this Committee on time.

It is disrespectful. We, the Committee, by rule is supposed to receive testimony in advance of the hearing so we can absorb it and learn from it. Testimony came in late. This is the second time since I have been chair that this has happened.

I just want to make the VA aware that I will not allow this to continue. I do not think it is too much for this Committee to get testimony on time so staff and Members have an opportunity to adequately understand its contents.

Now, on to the substance of this hearing. There was a survey in October 2010 that indicated nearly 60 percent of veterans did not understand or were not fully aware of the benefits available to them.

I happen to think that in many areas the VA does enormously good work and important work. I was just in the VA center in White River Junction on Saturday and looked at a program that is literally saving many lives.

But no matter how good the programs are that the VA has, no matter how good its variety of health care programs may be, or what they are doing in homelessness or many other areas, it does not mean anything to the veteran if that veteran does not know about it.

We have 22 million veterans in this country. Some of them do not want to access the VA and that is fine. But I do think it is our job to do as much as we possibly can to make sure that every veteran in America has the information they need to make the choice, to understand what the VA is offering so they can say, “No, I do not want to access it,” or, “Wow, I really did not know that. This is terribly important to my family.” “I did not know about this educational opportunity. I did not know about this health care program.”

So, the truth is also that we are in the 21st Century. We have computers and email and social media; and while I think we can say historically, the VA has not done a terribly good job in outreach, I think what we can also say in fairness to the VA in the last few years we have seen a significant turnaround.

I got involved in this issue because about 10 years ago in the State of Vermont, I was not impressed about how few Vermont veterans knew about VA programs.

I went around the State with VA and we had hundreds and hundreds of people coming out to these meetings, saying, “Oh, I did not know that I am entitled to that. I did not know what the VA has to offer in terms of low cost prescription drugs. I did not know how I can access that.”

So, the bad news is, historically, the VA has not done a particularly good job in outreach. The good news is that we have seen some significant turnaround. Nobody who looks at VA’s Web site today could deny that it is a lot better than it was a year ago and that VA is making progress on other fronts as well.

We are here today to learn from the VA how they are communicating with veterans, some of whom are in desperate need of VA programs but do not know about them.

A particular problem is with older veterans—Korea, Vietnam, folks—who do not necessarily feel comfortable on the internet. How are we reaching out to those veterans?

There is a lot to discuss and I look forward not only to hearing from Dr. Sowers but to hearing from our wonderful panel that will follow him and talk about the very good work they are doing independent of the VA.

Senator Burr.

**STATEMENT OF HON. RICHARD BURR, RANKING MEMBER,  
U.S. SENATOR FROM NORTH CAROLINA**

Senator BURR. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I will not cover the same thing that Chairman Sanders covered as it related to the timeliness of your remarks; but whatever the Chairman chooses to do, I will back him fully. I think that the Committee deserves better from the VA including a pledge to the Chairman to work in whatever fashion to make sure that this practice—I say practice because it is not an isolated incident—stops.

Mr. Chairman, thank you for this important hearing that will focus on the outreach of VA and how community-based organizations can help veterans access services.

I would like to also take this opportunity to welcome all of our witnesses today. Before I talk about the importance of leveraging community assets that can help identify veterans in need or help

veterans find needed assistance locally, I would like to touch on the VA's current outreach efforts.

During both the fiscal years 2012 and 2013 budget hearings, I asked the VA to provide information on the amount of money enterprise-wide that VA spent on outreach activities as well as what matrix it uses to determine the effectiveness of its outreach initiatives.

In response to my questions for fiscal year 2012, the VA's Office of Public and Intergovernmental Affairs, or OPIA, indicated that it had previously stood up the National Veterans' Outreach Office, which was tasked with tracking costs associated with outreach activities, providing training to VA to outreach personnel, and evaluating and developing metrics to measure effectiveness.

They stated that they hoped they would be able to provide the cost information within the next year. A year later, in pre-hearing questions for the 2013 budget hearing, I again asked VA for information on the amount of money spent on outreach. VA provided the Committee with information showing that from fiscal year 2009 to 2013, VA had spent a total of \$83.7 million on outreach.

Although this amount only included an estimate on the spending of 2013, I was pleased that VA had begun to account for the money being spent. I was hopeful that this was the first step toward Public and Intergovernmental Affairs Office and NVO undertaking the needed process of coordinating VA outreach as well as determining which programs were effective in assisting veterans and which were not. Unfortunately, this has not happened.

It is my understanding that from March until August of last year, NVO was without a director. Only in August 2012 was a full-time director hired to run NVO and oversee all the VA outreach activities.

To make matters worse, the previous director was on temporary assignment, meaning NVO had been without full-time leadership for over a year.

Because of this, VA has no enterprise-wide metrics to determine whether outreach is effective and is unable in the short term to provide the Committee with updated cost information.

Mr. Sowers, VA is a large department and I understand individual medical centers, regional offices, and programmatic offices are largely responsible for their own outreach activities. However, NVO under your office has been charged with coordinating outreach, and I believe this should be a real priority for you: to ensure that NVO is meeting its assigned task.

There are veterans in need of services and it is vital that VA effectively reach out to them to ensure that they are aware of the health care and benefit assistance that is available.

If VA is unable to quantify their current outreach efforts, I believe it calls into question whether any future outreach will be duplicative or will have the desired outcome.

Turning to the second panel, I am interested in hearing more on how we can leverage existing community assets to reach veterans in need. As I have discussed in previous Committee hearings, private-public partnerships in the context of mental health care is a great way to ensure that veterans get the care they earned and deserve.

By using a similar model for outreach, veterans will be better placed to find programs offered by local governments and non-profits that can best meet their needs.

Finally, I hope to learn more about the existing community integration initiatives, whether there are any best practices that can be expanded nationally, and if there are ways to partner with the VA.

Veterans live in both rural and urban areas, and VA resources may not be available close to where they live. However, almost every community in this country has a network of veterans, businesses, or non-profits willing to help in the efforts which can be coordinated in a meaningful way.

I look forward to the testimony today and I thank the Chair.

Chairman SANDERS. Thank you, Senator Burr.

Senator Tester.

**STATEMENT OF HON. JON TESTER,  
U.S. SENATOR FROM MONTANA**

Senator TESTER. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Burr, Mr. Sowers, and the witness that are to come yet.

We are at a time when agencies are attempting to do more with less. So, it only makes sense to work more collaboratively with partners, to better utilize all the tools that are at our disposal.

That means building partnerships with other Federal agencies to ensure the we are working as efficiently and productively as possible. It also means jurisdictional issues and duplication of effort that impede progress. It also means that we need to explore and build stronger partnerships with local partners, non-profits, and the private sector.

We have a lot of challenges addressing the needs of our veterans and we have got a lot of folks out there that are willing to help. We have got to the folks who are willing to help better engaged in the process. I think that is why you are here and the next panel is here.

So, I think that if we coordinate better, we can reach that common goal of serving our veterans better, and that is the bottom line.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman SANDERS. Senator Brown.

**STATEMENT OF HON. SHERROD BROWN,  
U.S. SENATOR FROM OHIO**

Senator BROWN. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Thank you, Mr. Sowers, for joining us, and I appreciate the comments of Senator Burr and Senator Tester.

A comment to our Nation's veterans begins at outreach before ending the backlog, before quality of care, before ending homelessness. Our efforts will fall short if we are not reaching every veteran. That obviously almost goes without saying.

I appreciate the Chairman holding a hearing on this important issue. And outreach cannot be solely a VA issue. It has to be the responsibility of all of us. I have done a series of events around Ohio promoting VRAP for the last several months.



People in my State in many cases are not aware of it. They have benefited greatly from it, those who have signed up. We know that is replicated in State after State.

The Ohio Department of Veterans' Services estimated it has contract information for more than 450,000 of Ohio's veterans. Yet VA estimates that Ohio actually is the home some 875,000 veterans. Not all of those accounted for may qualify for benefits. Some of those veterans surely would not.

We know from experience that many do: from burial expenses to education to health care. So, it is more than just the benefits of VA. The veterans we are not reaching are also missing out on a wide network of Veterans Service Organizations.

We know that people come home after serving in Iraq or Afghanistan, do not connect with the local VA in either the veterans service office, which Ohio has in each of the 88 counties, or the Veterans Service Organizations.

Outreach is not a one-size-fits-all endeavor. I have held a series of field hearings in Appalachia in southeast Ohio. I was taken by the dean of Ohio University's eastern campus who said, "Many Appalachian veterans or families never seek help. They do the best they can through self-help. This is oftentimes not enough for those encountering depression, anxiety, or post traumatic stress due to their previous combat experience.

"If we are to effectively help Appalachian veterans and their families, we will need to educate them and the public about the impact of the combat experience on these veterans. We will need to implement aggressive outreach programs informing veterans about the services that are available to them."

He was speaking specifically of Appalachian veterans but we know anecdotally that that is far too common for veterans all over the country.

So, we spend a lot of time investing in the VA. We spend money giving VA resources. These investments do not mean a whole lot if we have not reached out as well as we should to the people who served our country.

So, Mr. Sowers, thank you.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman SANDERS. Let me just ask this if I might. Mr. Burr, would you say, in general, in North Carolina is the average veteran aware of his or her benefits?

Senator BURR. Mr. Chairman, let me say that North Carolina may be a unique State simply because of the military footprint that is there and the fact that we are the fastest growing veterans population in the country.

So, I think our veterans are pretty aware. It is probably not through the outreach programs of the VA. It is more the size of the infrastructure.

Chairman SANDERS. Jon, what do you think in Montana?

Senator TESTER. I think it depends on what conflict they were involved in. I can tell you there are a lot of vets that were turned down for service years ago. They quite frankly do not know that they can come back and try again, because we have changed the rules of the game.

So, that is a challenge.

I think that the VSOs—if the VA was able to utilize them and if the VSOs could get recruitment to members involved in the different organizations, it could really help the VA get their education out. It is very difficult.

I mean, I will just tell you. I had a meeting when I first got on this Committee and there was a veteran that came in to the meeting we had and he says, I just came out of the woods, and it was not a figurative statement. He literally just came out of the woods, and he had been there since the Vietnam conflict.

Chairman SANDERS. Sherrod.

Senator BROWN. Yes, briefly. I go back to my dad. My dad was a World War II vet, and he hardly ever talked about it like many in that generation. One of the things I most appreciate about being on this Committee is to encourage older vets, World War II vets, whether they are making the visits to Washington, to see the veterans memorial or at a veterans' organization in Chillicothe to get them to tell their stories.

I think that sort of reluctance to speak out is also—generally they are not particularly aware of this—it is a pretty self-reliant group of people. I also think the military so often does not really give them any guidance when they leave the Armed Forces and come back to this country.

They do not tell them much about how you can go to Youngstown State in a special program for combat veterans or how you can connect with the local community-based outpatient clinic. The military needs to do better. I think we need to do better. I think our culture needs to do better with this.

Chairman SANDERS. Thank you.

Dr. Sowers, the mic is yours.

**STATEMENT OF TOMMY SOWERS, Ph.D., ASSISTANT SECRETARY FOR PUBLIC AND INTERGOVERNMENTAL AFFAIRS, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS**

Mr. SOWERS. Chairman Sanders, Ranking Member Burr, and distinguished Members of the Committee, on behalf of Secretary Shinseki and the employees at the VA, I am honored to be here this morning to update you on the Department's outreach. I would like to briefly explain where we are, the situation, and where we are headed.

Chairman, as you mentioned, there are more than 22 million veterans in the United States, yet less than half currently access the VA. In addition, the 2010 survey that you referenced said that 60 percent of veterans knew either very little or nothing at all about their VA benefits.

I used to be one of the 60 percent. While on active duty in the military, the military had my full attention. Upon leaving the Army, I learned what many other veterans already know, that while service made me strong, the VA can make me stronger.

Because of the VA, I was able to file and receive a claim, earn my doctorate, thanks to the Post-9/11 GI Bill, and I get first-rate health care at VA facilities. I know firsthand the impact of awareness of these benefits.

From early in his tenure, Secretary Shinseki identified increasing veterans access as one of his top three priorities, and today we can see our outreach efforts making a difference.

Accessing health care has never been simpler. Across the country, Iraq and Afghanistan veterans are utilizing VA health care at a rate greater than any previous generation, including an unprecedented increase in the number of women receiving care at the VA.

Education and compensation benefits have been never been greater. I and about a million other veterans and family members have gone back to school on the Post-9/11 GI Bill. In the last few years, we have added about a million more to our compensation rolls.

But in the Special Forces, I learned you cannot accomplish a mission alone. You have got to work by, with, and through others in order to get it done. The Secretary and I both meet regularly with non-profits, for-profits, and veterans service and advocacy organizations.

Following my comments this morning, we will hear from a few of the over 10,000 organizations committed to making a difference in the lives of veterans and their families.

Mike Monroe of Point of Light works closely with our caregiver initiative and our benefits administration to find ways to increase economic opportunities for veterans.

In New York City, Eric Weingartner of the Robin Hood Foundation helps veterans and families in poverty complementing our aggressive homeless outreach, and our medical centers collaborate with volunteers through Wendy Spencer at the Corporation for National and Community Service.

We have also greatly expanded our outreach to State and local governments. Last year the VA signed a memorandum of understanding with the National Association of State Directors of Veterans Affairs.

Massachusetts' veterans leader, Coleman Nee, does great work from connecting our homeless prevention efforts with local leaders to helping veterans get the training and certifications they need to get good jobs.

And last week in Boston, VA medical staff worked closely with Coleman and other State officials to respond to those events, connecting the victims with our experience with dealing, assessing, and recovering from trauma.

Tomorrow, VA is deploying three mobile Vet Centers throughout the greater Boston area to assist local authorities with counseling those affected by the attack, and we will be there for those injured while they recover, helping them re-define their mission. For decades we have challenged and inspired our injured veterans through our rehabilitative sports programs.

I could continue to tell you about where we are from our Web site, from Make the Connection Campaign to our involvement with think tanks to our expanded social media presence. But I know all good messages are delivered succinctly. So, I look forward to saying more during the question portion.

What I am really excited about today is where we are headed tomorrow. Immediately after my arrival last August, we evaluated

our current outreach and initiated planning to launch a new campaign called VA Access.

VA Access is a multi-year communication and outreach effort involving our three administrations and VA staff offices. We have incorporated best practices from the private sector, built-in strategic and tactical objectives, set milestones, and established quantifiable metrics to measure our performance.

The central method we use to measure our success is by the number of new customers, in our case veterans, accessing the system.

VA Access is built around VA's first ever national advertising campaign. We partnered with the Ad Council and are excited to work with the renowned and award-winning advertising firm DDB on a pro bono basis. We are learning about our customers with extensive quantitative and qualitative research; and kicking off in the weeks prior to Veterans' Day this year, you will start seeing our coordinated campaign on TV, radio, billboards and magazines.

That is our perspective on the situation, where we are and where we are going. VA deeply appreciates the continued support of this Committee.

On a personal level, I am deeply honored to represent my fellow veterans and help them access the services and benefits they have earned.

Thank you. I look forward to your questions.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Sowers follows:]

PREPARED STATEMENT OF TOMMY SOWERS, PH.D., ASSISTANT SECRETARY FOR PUBLIC AND INTERGOVERNMENTAL AFFAIRS, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS

Good morning. Chairman Sanders, Senator Burr and distinguished Members of the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee. Thank you for the opportunity today to discuss the Department's outreach efforts, our approach and major accomplishments, along with emerging initiatives and the way forward. I will highlight successful programs we have already conducted and other programs we will be conducting in the coming weeks, months and year. One important theme of our outreach strategy is the importance of national and local partnerships, which are essential to reach Veterans and their families.

VA's three Administrations—Veterans Benefits Administration, Veterans Health Administration, and National Cemetery Administration—and our central office are working closer than ever to plan, coordinate and integrate meaningful outreach activities across the Department. The 2012 Biennial Report to Congress, submitted earlier today, outlines the outreach activities of the Department.

#### OVERVIEW

Since Secretary Eric K. Shinseki arrived in VA in January 2009, everything the VA does, including outreach activities is driven by a framework based on three fundamental principles; people-centric, results-oriented, and forward-looking.

- *People-Centric:* Veterans remain the centerpiece of our effort. As it pertains to outreach, this means VA must address Veterans' changing needs over time and develop strategies that effectively communicates how VA is meeting the needs of Veterans.

- *Results-Oriented:* The real measurement of VA's success is the timeliness, quality and consistency of the benefits and services we provide to Veterans and other beneficiaries.

- *Forward-Looking:* Seek opportunities for delivering the best services with available resources, continuing to do things smarter and more effectively. VA outreach efforts must leverage the latest technology to reach today's Veterans and future Veterans. Future outreach and services must take into consideration the changing Veteran landscape.

VA's approach to outreach is built on three pillars: (1) outreach efforts will be centrally planned with decentralized execution; (2) VA will leverage technology to the

maximum extent possible; and (3) VA will maximize partnerships to achieve optimal results.

On a daily basis, the National Veterans Outreach Office (NVO), aligned under the Office of Public and Intergovernmental Affairs (OPIA), provides strategic oversight over VA's outreach efforts and ensures the above three pillars are applied throughout the Department.

To accomplish our important outreach mission, and among many other supporting efforts, VA is increasing the speed, accuracy, and efficiency of on-line information available to Veterans, Servicemembers, and eligible beneficiaries. The good news is our outreach efforts are making a difference in the lives of Veterans.

The Post-9/11 generation of Veterans is using VA benefits and services at higher rates than any previous group in Veterans in history. Iraq and Afghanistan combat Veterans are eligible, within 5 years from the date of their discharge or release from active duty, for up to five years of free health care. Over 55 percent of returning Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans are utilizing VA health care today.

Approximately one million Veterans have enrolled in the Post-9/11 G.I. Bill since its inception. The Post-9/11 GI Bill provides enlisted Servicemembers, officers and some family members with up to 36 months of benefits, payment of tuition and fees, a stipend for books, and a monthly housing allowance. Veterans and other beneficiaries are using these benefits to pursue undergraduate degrees, graduate degrees, and non-degree-producing technical certification.

VA has also dramatically expanded its outreach to women Veterans. The number of women Veterans using VA health care has increased to 354,000. VA health care for women includes gender-specific primary care such as breast cancer screens; mental health evaluation and assistance for issues such as sexual trauma, domestic violence and parenting; and specialty care including reproductive health care.

#### INCREASING AWARENESS AND ACCESS

The importance of outreach cannot be overstated. There are more than 22 million Veterans in the United States—and based on the most-recent National Survey of Veterans—less than half are currently accessing any VA benefits. In addition, that same survey revealed almost 60 percent of Veterans know either “very little” or “nothing at all” about their VA benefits. These statistics present both a challenge and an opportunity.

To address this challenge, VA is also moving to more self-service, technology-enabled interactions in order to provide Veterans easier access to information and the ability to execute transactions at a time and place convenient to the Veteran.

Closer coordination and synchronization of VA outreach activities and efforts has been instrumental in achieving several major accomplishments during the past few years:

- VA is working closely with State Directors of Veterans Affairs to ensure their veterans service officers are properly trained to better prepare fully developed claims to reduce processing time.
- eBenefits enrollment surpassed the 2.5 million point by the end of Fiscal Year 2012—in part due to increased marketing, outreach and closer collaboration between VA and Department of Defense (DOD).
- Veteran's homelessness has decreased more than 17 percent since 2009 as VA has intensified our national outreach, public communication, public-private partnerships and advocacy work in unison to rescue homeless Veterans while simultaneously implementing prevention programs.
- Veterans Health Administration (VHA) outreach is integrated with new construction and health service initiatives to better provide access, and serve Veterans as demonstrated through three hospital construction projects, including opening a state-of-the art hospital in Las Vegas—the first in 17 years.
- Since 2009, VA has added 57 new community-based outpatient clinics (CBOCs) giving us a total of 840 CBOCs through 2013 and we have increased the number of mobile outpatient clinics and mobile Vet Centers serving rural Veterans to 81.
- For the eleventh consecutive year, the National Cemetery Administration (NCA) was rated the top customer service organization in the Nation, outperforming major U.S. corporations. According to the American Customer Satisfaction Index, in 2012 NCA received the highest scores ever attained by a public or private organization.
- VA's Mental Health outreach is fully integrated with suicide prevention programs to reach Veterans through both traditional and social media to build awareness on how to seek VA help and assistance.
- VHA's “Make the Connection” campaign has been highly successful in getting Veterans to seek assistance and in saving lives. For example, in outreach conducted

since November 2011, Web site visits have exceeded 2.3 million, more than 5.7 million on-line views, and 3.8 million impressions on Facebook.

- VBA has expanded its outreach to U.S. military Reserve Component (Army National Guard, Air National Guard, Marine Reserves, etc.) Servicemembers and their families. This outreach effort is accomplished through six major initiatives: (1) Demobilization Initiative, (2) Individual Ready Reserve Muster, (3) Yellow Ribbon Reintegration Program, (4) Post-deployment Health Reassessment, (5) Transition Assistance, and (6) OEF/OIF/OND Internet Web page and social media.

- Since the beginning of combat operations in Afghanistan and Iraq, through FY 2012, VA's Vet Centers have engaged 604,194 OEF/OIF/OND Veterans, 443,841 of whom were outreach contacts seen primarily at military demobilization and National Guard and Reserve sites. Services include mental health counseling, career counseling and VA service and benefits assistance.

- Eligible Veterans and family members received Vet Center Services at over 89,000 distinct outreach activities and events. These services include individual and group counseling, marital and family counseling, bereavement counseling, medical and benefits referral and employment counseling.

The Department continues to improve its outreach efforts by initiating many new programs such as deploying mobile Vet Centers into rural areas, establishing more community based outpatient clinics and providing mental health crisis line services; increasing visibility through different advertising and marketing campaigns; coordinating communication across VA using consistent messaging; and strengthening partnerships with other Federal agencies, state, city and local governments, Veterans Service Organizations (VSOs), Military Support Organizations (MSOs), and other stakeholders who support or assist Veterans and their families in accessing VA benefits and services.

#### VA ACCESS CAMPAIGN

Shortly after my arrival in August 2012, we initiated detailed planning to launch a new outreach campaign called "VA Access." The campaign launched in January 2013. VA Access is a comprehensive outreach strategy involving all resources within the Department. Its primary objective is to inform Veterans of the care and benefits they have earned and how to access them, for example, using the eBenefits portal. The campaign is a multi-year effort using both traditional and social media communication mediums.

VA Access is based on a three key principles. First, Veterans learn best from other Veterans. Second, sustained outreach empowers Veterans and their family members to stay informed of their benefits through important stages in their lives. Third, the life of every Veteran—or their family members—is improved or enhanced by accessing the Veterans benefits they have earned. I will now briefly summarize the major components of VA Access.

*"Pro Bono" National Advertising Campaign.* Our flagship project is VA's first-ever national advertising campaign with the New York City-based Ad Council, which is made possible by pro bono contributions of our partners. With our close involvement and oversight, the Ad Council and our pro bono partner have conducted extensive research—including the use of Veteran focus groups—and will create, produce and distribute ads on TV, radio, social media, billboards and magazines.

We recently completed our quantitative and qualitative research. Creative development and review, including field testing, will start in May. And the Ads will start running nationally this October.

The Ad Council program represents huge benefits to taxpayers and Veterans by maximizing a cost-efficient marketing and advertising program while reaching national Veterans audiences and stakeholders.

*Social Media Enhancements/Efforts.* VA also recognizes the importance of Social Media to reach our audiences. Our online communication presence is now fresh, relevant and Veteran-focused. This past October, we totally redesigned our public-facing Web page ([www.VA.gov](http://www.VA.gov)). Our new web design is more user friendly, intuitive, and features a new look and feel, so Veterans and beneficiaries can better navigate content for their specific needs. We are removing redundant, outdated and trivial information.

*"Buddy Program."* Nearly one in four Federal employees is a Veteran. However, as is true with the larger population, many Veterans working in the Federal Government may not be aware of VA benefits and services available to them. To address this, later this year we will launch a new initiative with our Federal Agency partners.

The objective of our “Buddy Program” is to inform Federal employees who are Veterans of their benefits, while encouraging them to share the information with other Veterans they know.

Veteran Employment Program Offices and public affairs staff can post information about the program on agency intra-net sites—informing participants on how they can enroll in eBenefits or learn more about VA health care programs, they may be eligible for. We are also distributing posters to other Federal agencies to help promote this effort.

*Veterans Day.* As we look toward November 2013, we see the culmination of intensive outreach activities coming together at the perfect point in time—Veterans Day. As our Nation pauses to recognize and thank Veterans, a positive sentiment focused on Veterans fills the air. This presents an incredible opportunity for VA and Veterans groups to join together for a unified call to action to increase access to VA.

As we approach Veterans Day, we are asking VSOs to have “open house” events and other events focused on getting more Veterans to access the benefits and services they have earned. The stage is set and we are moving forward.

#### INTERGOVERNMENTAL PARTNERSHIPS

OPIA’s Office of Intergovernmental Affairs (IGA) continues to implement a broad outreach strategy to ensure VA is communicating and coordinating our efforts across all levels of Federal, state and local governments.

Over the last two years IGA has established or strengthened its working relationship with the following groups and organizations that represent state and local governments or entities:

- Governors—National Governors Association (NGA).
- National Guard Bureau and the State Adjutant Generals.
- State Directors of Veterans Affairs (NASDVA).
- State Veterans Home Administrators (NASVH).
- Council of State Governments (CSG).
- State Legislators (NCSL).
- County Elected Officials (NaCo).
- County Veteran Service Officers (NACVSO).
- Mayors (U.S.C.M.).

IGA has implemented and routinely participates in the following outreach initiatives:

- Formal Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) signed by the Secretary of VA and the President of NASDVA, furthering VA’s commitment to coordinating our efforts with our state partners.
- Quarterly conference calls with NASDVA to provide VA subject matter experts (SMEs) to address VA priority programs and initiatives.
- Bi-weekly meetings with the Governors’ Federal Representatives in Washington DC to provide information on VA priority programs and initiatives and address VA related issues or concerns.
- Weekly meetings with White House Office of Intergovernmental Affairs to further coordinate our outreach efforts with other Federal agencies with programs impacting Veterans.
- Annual Conferences for all state and local organizations listed above.
- Mid-Winter Conferences for NASDVA and NASVH.

#### TRIBAL GOVERNMENT OUTREACH

In November 2009, President Obama tasked all Federal departments to fully implement Executive Order 13175 on “Consultation and Coordination with Indian Tribal Governments.” VA developed its plan in 2010, Secretary Shinseki signed VA’s Tribal Consultation policy in 2011, and the VA Office of Tribal Government Relations (OTGR) was established in OPIA and staffed in 2011.

The end result of our efforts is to expand and enhance communications between the Department and American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN) tribal leaders to improve services to AI/AN Veterans.

Outreach activities undertaken by OTGR include:

- Sponsoring outreach booths at approximately five conferences hosted by Native American advocacy organizations. VA staff gave presentations during conference events and gave updates on VA programs for Native American Veterans.
- Initiating tribal consultation on programs and services offered by the VA’s three Administrations. Tribal consultation events were held in Washington D.C., Anchorage, AK, Lincoln, NE and Denver, CO.

- Collaborating on tribal consultation with the Department of Health and Human Services/Indian Health Service (IHS) on a draft agreement to facilitate VA reimbursement for direct care services provided by IHS AI/AN Veterans.
- Hosting meetings in Washington, DC; Spokane, WA; Shakopee, MN; Albuquerque, NM; Grand Ronde, OR; Norman, OK; and Milwaukee, WI with tribal leaders, Veterans and Veteran service providers. Collectively, these sessions drew over 1,000 attendees.
- Facilitating three listening sessions between VA officials and tribal leaders and Veterans in Bismarck, ND, Billings, MT, and Albuquerque, NM.
- Drafting a resource guide for tribes interested in integrating aspects of Veterans Courts into tribal justice systems.
- Sponsoring themed outreach materials in 2011 to VHA Alaska, focused on outreach to Alaska Native communities within the state.
- Initiating a bi-weekly electronic newsletter for tribal leaders and Veterans in the Midwest.

#### HOMELESS VETERANS OUTREACH

In keeping with President Obama's pledge to honor and support our Veterans, the Secretary of VA established a VA priority goal of ending homelessness among Veterans in 2015. In support of that goal, OPIA's Homeless Veterans Initiative Office (HVIO) authored, with input from all VA administrations and staff offices, VA's Five-Year Plan to End Veteran Homelessness.

A vital component of VA's strategy to end homelessness among Veterans is VA's National Call Center for Homeless Veterans (NCCHV), because it serves as the entry portal through which many homeless and at-risk Veterans find out about VA homeless services. NCCHV provides 24/7 access to VA homeless services by phone at 877-4-AID-VET and by online chat at [www.va.gov/homeless](http://www.va.gov/homeless).

In 2011, HVIO launched a multi-pronged outreach campaign urging every citizen to "Make the Call" to the NCCHV if they are or know a Veteran who is homeless or at risk of homelessness.

The "Make the Call" campaign included the following six elements:

- Outreach awareness and information events in 28 targeted cities across the country in October 2012 to launch the outreach campaign;
- Outreach that enlisted assistance from national and local organizations that come into contact with Veterans on a daily basis;
- Assistance from over 2,300 community partners such as soup kitchens, shelters, local government agencies, first responders, and faith based organizations to help share information with homeless and at risk Veterans about VA resources;
- Four web videos that focused on the roles different professions (social workers, medical professionals, first responders, and legal professionals) can play in connecting Veterans with services to prevent or overcome homelessness.

VA is committed to preventing and ending homelessness among Veterans and their families by the end of 2015 and is poised to assist homeless and at-risk Veterans in achieving their optimal level of functioning and quality of life. Outreach is critical to ensuring the goal of ending Veteran homelessness is achieved.

As a result of VA's outreach campaign focused on homeless Veterans, calls to NCCHV increased by 123 percent and VA's media activities resulted in over one billion impressions during fiscal year 2012. More importantly, VA helped prevent many Veterans from becoming homeless and helped many others successfully transition from homelessness to having a home and becoming self-sufficient. Today, more Veterans are accessing VA homeless services than ever before. Below are a few specific measures that reflect the success of VA's homeless Veteran outreach activities.

- From September 2011 to September 2012, calls to NCCHV rose from 36,100 to 80,558. During the same period, there was a 125 percent increase in calls from Veterans seeking assistance to NCCHV, evidence VA is increasingly reaching its targeted population.
- There was a 334 percent increase in calls from Veterans at risk of homelessness between fiscal year 2011 to fiscal year 2012.
- The media campaign resulted in over 1 billion impressions:
  - Cable television—15 second and 30 second spots: 358,978,000 impressions;
  - Out of home—posters, transit shelters, bulletins, bus advertising: 230,000,000 impressions;
  - Radio—15 second and 30 second audio spots: 534,718,000 impressions;
  - Online display—banner ads: 100,653,568 impressions/80,000 clicks;
  - Online video share—30 second and 60 second audio/video: 350,000 video views.



## OFFICE OF PUBLIC AFFAIRS DIGITAL STRATEGY

Through the Office of Public Affairs, VA will continue to execute a digital media strategy that is content focused to provide Veterans and other stakeholders relevant and timely information delivered on a variety of platforms. Digital content is available through traditional va.gov Web sites as well as social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter and blogs, and other cutting edge platforms.

Currently VA's Facebook page has more than 250,000 subscribers, which is more than any other cabinet-level agency.

## REHABILITATIVE SPORTS

VA plans and executes outreach to our wounded, injured and ill Veterans through our rehabilitative adaptive sports programs. In a strategic partnership with the U.S. Olympic Committee, VA grant monies support both national events and local events in communities where our Veterans live. These events not only support rehabilitation, but provide VA an opportunity to educate Veterans about other available programs, benefits and services that could health and overall quality of life. These events also give Veterans opportunities to share information and success stories about VA benefits and services with other Veterans.

## STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIPS

Successful Veteran outreach cannot be accomplished by the VA alone. Many Veterans Service Organizations (VSOs) and non-profit organizations (NPOs) are making a huge difference in the lives of Veterans. The Ad Council research underscores the importance of "Vet-to-Vet" contact and peer influence. Simply put, Veterans trust other Veterans.

Therefore, sustaining and building relationships with VSO and NPO groups is crucial to helping inform Veterans and to enrolling more Veterans in VA.

The Secretary and I both meet quarterly with several VSO representatives, and VA is now reaching out more directly to NPOs. In those forums, we share information and we are asking the VSOs to help us enroll Veterans in concert with their respective Veteran advocacy roles

## SUMMARY

The Department of Veterans Affairs outreach programs focus on increased awareness and access of the VA benefits and services earned by Veterans and their families. We are working to coordinate and integrate outreach efforts across the VA to improve efficiency of resources, maximize technology and social media assets, and improving cooperation with Veterans Service and Non-profit organizations working to assist Veterans and their families every day.

Mr. Chairman, this concludes my statement. I am pleased to answer any questions you or other Members of the Committee may have.

Chairman SANDERS. Thank you very much for your testimony. Let me begin with health care. How many veterans now access the VA health care system?

Mr. SOWERS. We have 8.9 million enrolled.

Chairman SANDERS. Who are in the program?

Mr. SOWERS. That is correct, Chairman Sanders.

Chairman SANDERS. What is your guess as to how many people might be eligible for the program who are not in it?

Mr. SOWERS. Well, there are 22.4 million veterans that are out there, Chairman Sanders; and unless they were dishonorably discharged, they are eligible for the program, they are eligible for health care.

Chairman SANDERS. How many veterans do we think lack any health insurance at all?

Mr. SOWERS. That is a good question, Chairman Sanders. I will get with VHA to get that precise estimate.

Chairman SANDERS. You would agree with me that your job is to make sure that every veteran in America, whether or not he or

she wants to access VA services, and many do not for whatever reason, know what those benefits are.

Mr. SOWERS. That is correct, Chairman Sanders.

Chairman SANDERS. You are dealing with a wide spectrum of folks. You are dealing with people who just left Iraq and Afghanistan, who are very computer savvy. You are dealing with World War II veterans who have never used a computer in their lives. You have a whole bunch of universes out there that you have to access.

I am concerned about the older veterans right now, say Vietnam vets. Do you suspect that there are many Vietnam vets who might have, initially when they returned home from Vietnam, had bad experiences with the VA? What is your strategy of reaching out to those veterans?

Mr. SOWERS. Chairman Sanders, thank you very much for that question. The strategy is multi-faceted. Actually, Vietnam veterans is the larger proportion of veterans on FaceBook but it is going to require more than FaceBook. It is going to require some direct face time as well. Vietnam veterans represent the largest cohort with a membership within the Veterans Service Organizations.

So, when I came in, I initiated meetings with the Veterans Service Organizations and non-profit leaders. We have got to reach these veterans by, with, and through some of these partners.

I will give you one other example. About a hundred hours ago I was standing in Wales, Alaska, population 145, looking over the frozen Bering Sea. I was standing there with the Alaska State Veterans' Affairs Director, the head of our health care system, and our local tribal veteran representative.

In this town of 145, about as rural as you can get, there are Vietnam veterans there that, as you said, may not want these programs; but once we explained it to them in a face-to-face way, we got veterans to sign up.

We need those sorts of interactions to occur in rural communities across the country.

Chairman SANDERS. For the Post-9/11 veterans, the VA is now providing free health care for the first 5 years upon their return. What percentage of those veterans know that?

Mr. SOWERS. Chairman Sanders, what we have seen is that 56 percent of the 1.5 million Iraq and Afghanistan veterans have utilized VA health care. That is historically unprecedented.

We have historically been around the mid-30s. In terms of the Iraq and Afghanistan vets, and what we are finding is that Iraq and Afghanistan veterans especially with the Post-9/11 GI Bill, have sky-high awareness of this incredible program that you all have supported again and again.

Chairman SANDERS. Let me interrupt you for a second. My time is running out. So, you think we are doing well. Is that because of the TAP program? Has that been important?

Mr. SOWERS. Chairman Sanders, I believe the improvements to TAP have made positive contributions to it. When I got out, it was more like death by PowerPoint. I have seen the new TAP. It is an improvement from what I went through but we have got to do more.

There is a lot of confusion out there between the compensation and care, and that is a message that I have been working aggressively to get out.

Chairman SANDERS. All right. So, 56 percent does seem to be a pretty high number. Do you think we have done a fairly good job informing the younger veterans about VA health care and that significant numbers of them are taking advantage of that?

Mr. SOWERS. Chairman Sanders, the numbers are historically high. I just think we have got to do better. I mean, I have run into veterans, smart veterans—one of my buddies is a Rhodes Scholar who injured his shoulder in the service and did not yet know about the 5 years of free health care.

So, it is something we have got to continue to work on although we are seeing historically high numbers.

Chairman SANDERS. I think you have heard from all of the members the importance of working effectively with State, local government, and non-profits. Say a few words about what you are trying to do in that area.

Mr. SOWERS. Chairman Sanders, it is vitally important and within my office is the Office of Intergovernmental Affairs. The memorandum of understanding signed with the National Association of State Directors of Veterans Affairs is absolutely important.

When I travel around to the States, when I was in Ohio, I met with Tom Moe. He told me about the unique, innovative programs that they are doing in Ohio. When I was in North Carolina, it was Tim Wipperman there who told about the unique programs that they are doing there.

We know that the best solutions are not all coming out of DC, that they are at the local level where we are seeing great solutions.

Part of that memorandum of understanding is working with that organization to recognize and understand the best practices so that we can spread those out across the country.

Chairman SANDERS. OK.

Senator Burr.

Senator BURR. Dr. Sowers, welcome. I covered the numbers that VA provided for me for the 5-year period, the \$83 million. However, it is my understanding that NVO and OPIA is currently unable to provide the information that I requested which is updated cost information and projections as part of the questions for the record for the 2014 review.

Is that true?

Mr. SOWERS. Ranking Member Burr, I will inquire about that, the specific question that you asked. I know for our outreach efforts we have a specific number that we are tracking for what NVO spends on outreach.

Senator BURR. Let me ask on behalf of the Committee if you would provide those numbers for us and as well the metrics that you discussed in your opening statement that you have created to monitor it.

[The information requested during the hearing follows:]

RESPONSE TO REQUEST ARISING DURING THE HEARING BY HON. RICHARD BURR TO  
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS

*Question 1.* What is the Office of Public and Intergovernmental Affairs outreach budget for FY 14?

Response. The National Veterans Outreach Office outreach budget for Fiscal Year 2014 is \$4,000,000.00. This amount supports a more aggressive VA outreach plan, which includes the first iteration of an Ad Council national advertising campaign. These professional advertising services will enable the Department to conduct a national advertising effort designed to increase awareness among Veterans and family members regarding the breadth of services available to them and how to access those benefits and services.

*Question 2.* What is the metric VA is using to assess the effectiveness of VA's outreach campaign?

Response. The metric established for outreach is new access to one or more of VA's programs. Access is defined as a Veteran, family member, or a Servicemember who enroll, register, and/or use one or more VA benefits and services. The access baseline is the number of unique individuals who have accessed VA in FY 2012. New access is defined as an individual accessing VA who was not found in the system in FY 2012. The data was extracted from VBA, VHA, NCA and VA's e-Benefits portal.

In order to track and measure VA access, a reporting process was established and approved by the VA Chief of Staff in December 2012. On a monthly basis, the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA), Veterans Health Administration (VHA), and National Cemetery Administration (NCA) provide data within their respective areas of responsibility to the VA Office of Policy and Planning (OPP) to process and determine new clients accessing VA. The period for tracking and measure new access to VA for FY 2013 is October 1, 2012.

Senator BURR. I would agree with Chairman Sanders that 56 percent is an awfully good number, and I think it begs us to stop and ask, what is different about those separating from the current conflicts from the population that is more of a traditional VA population, that they might be so much better informed about the VA.

I think probably we could all point to social media as a tremendous tool which begs the question, that if we agree that it has had a major impact on the ability of veterans to become aware of the benefits that are available to them, why all of a sudden the departure to a \$4.3 million advertising campaign, which I sort of look at from a standpoint of it being traditional and social media being the 21st Century mode of communication?

Mr. SOWERS. Ranking Member Burr, that is a great question. I see this as a combined arms campaign. You have got to be in the air. You have got to be on the ground. You have got to be where the veteran is and the time, tone, medium, and frequency that they care about.

I will give you an example of how we are using social media to reach out. The Make the Connection Campaign is a campaign that started in June of last year.

Senator BURR. Make no mistake. Clearly, you are doing social media effectively. So, tell me what the theme and what your expectations are of a \$4.3 million advertising buy.

Is it to actually increase the reach or is it to be a little bit more high-profile relative to the effort?

Mr. SOWERS. Ranking Member Burr, thank you for that question. You know, a key thing about this campaign, if you are referring to the Ad Council campaign, it works on donated media and it works on pro bono work from the advertising firm.

Some folks, as we heard earlier, they want to receive mail. They want to receive things, you know, that they can feel and touch. Some folks want to see the messages on TV.

The great thing about working with the Ad Council and the pro bono firm, DDB, is that they bring to us decades of research on how to effectively message across a wide variety of medium.

So, it cannot just be social media. That will be part of the campaign but it will not be the entire part.

Senator BURR. So, is there a matrix that has been developed to determine whether this effort produces the predictable results?

Mr. SOWERS. Ranking Member Burr, the key metric that we are using is the number of new customers accessing the VA. After my arrival, we started tracking that for the first time, enterprise-wide.

You know, I am a customer of three products of the VA from two different Administrations; and so now, on a month-to-month basis, we know the number of new customers that are coming into the VA.

This year is the key one, where I can level set and get a sense of the exact matrix and how it flows, which months we see a higher intake versus others.

When we kick off this campaign in October, we will have a very clear idea with a full year of already counting exactly how many folks are coming into the VA.

Senator BURR. Last question. The initiative that will kick off in October. How many, if any, outreach programs were terminated and replaced by this program?

Mr. SOWERS. Ranking Member Burr, I can get back to you with a distinct answer. I see this as an additive program; but I will go back and check the history of it, of exactly what was replaced.

Senator BURR. Since you have taken over, have we terminated any outreach programs?

Mr. SOWERS. Ranking Member Burr, I will get back to you on the specifics of that.

Senator BURR. Thank you.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

[The information requested during the hearing follows:]

RESPONSE TO REQUEST ARISING DURING THE HEARING BY HON. RICHARD BURR TO  
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS

*Question.* Have any VA outreach programs been canceled since August 2012?

*Response.* The Office of Public and Intergovernmental Affairs has not canceled any outreach program.

Chairman SANDERS. Senator Tester.

Senator TESTER. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Thank you for your service, Mr. Sowers. Thanks for being here today. I want to talk a little bit about partnership with volunteers particularly as it applies to rural America.

I was encouraged to see the vets program which is under the Department of Labor and their initiative to provide outreach to unemployed veterans in rural area. It is critically important that we get a better idea of what services particular veterans need to utilize to get back into the work force.

So, from your perspective, can you speak to any initiatives launched by the VA to partner with various community groups to expand care or services to rural America?

Mr. SOWERS. Senator Tester, thank you very much for the question. As you know, I am a rural vet. I grew up in a town of 13,000 and there was no VA facility there.

But what is in my hometown is a VFW post. There is an American Legion post. There are a number of VSOs that have their boots on the ground in those communities.

So, what I initiated when I came to VA was, I need to speak with the communicators of these organization. So, on a quarterly basis we bring these veterans service organizations and non-profits in, and we bring them in not just to talk but to listen.

What we did, for example, on the Web site is instead of just revealing the Web site and saying, tah-dah, here it is, we brought in the VSO and non-profit leaders to ask what do you need, how can we do this better, how can we communicate with you.

Rural veterans, we know, are online. So, there is an online portion to it, yet there is also an on-the-ground component.

One thing that has happened in the last few years is the expansion of our mobile Vet Centers. I love the Vet Centers. They are a phenomenal, low threshold way that people can access VA. But the mobile Vet Centers have taken the show on the road.

Just as we are going to be able to deploy them to Boston tomorrow, they predominantly focus on rural areas where we do not have a VA facility. It brings counselors; it brings people that know about the benefits to that area.

Senator TESTER. I want to talk about something the Chairman has been an advocate of for some time now and this is community health centers.

The VA announced steps to partner aggressively with local providers such as community mental health centers. OK. But there has been, I think, a lack of communication and collaboration between the VA and the private providers I talked about in the previous hearing, as a matter of fact, to deliver care at local access points. It has been an issue for a long time.

What steps can be taken to improve the communication and collaboration between the VA and actual local health care providers, whether it is mental health or otherwise?

Mr. SOWERS. Senator Tester, thank you for that question. I have seen it work in a couple of different ways. One is the veterans' crisis line that you may know about. It has registered 700,000 calls, 26,000 saves.

At that center when they receive calls from wherever they are coming in, they immediately connect with the local providers, whether that is law enforcement, whether that is the mental health providers. They connect that call through the VA to the local provider.

The second one is what I just saw in Alaska. Since Secretary Shinseki's visit in 2011, we have expanded our sharing agreements with local tribal authorities that provide health care. So now, both tribal veterans and non-veterans can go to a local facility and receive that care instead of having to fly to Anchorage.

Senator TESTER. Well, you are the point man on intergovernmental affair. Can you talk about conversations that are going on within the government between, for instance, you, the VA, and Health and Human Services?

Indian Health is another one. You talked about that just a minute ago. Is there a conversation at this level that is being bled down to the ground so that the folks on the ground—so you can work between agencies?

Mr. SOWERS. Senator Tester, it is a great question. An example is the partnership that we have had with the Indian Health Services. So, that does not just require the VA to communicate out to the veterans but Indian Health Service to communicate out to their local providers as well.

So, we have been at the same table as we are forming the policy in partnership and then we both take our lines of operations.

Senator TESTER. Anything with HHS, Health and Human Services? Any conversations, any partnerships there?

Mr. SOWERS. Senator Tester, right now we are working closely with HHS on information about the Affordable Care Act to make sure that veterans are informed and understand some of the changes that are moving forward.

Senator TESTER. All right. Thank you very much.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman SANDERS. Senator Brown.

Senator BROWN. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Sowers, on the second panel one of the witnesses said in his prepared remarks that there are more than 40,000 organizations, overwhelmingly non-profits, working with veterans. I do not really even know what to recommend on this.

Is there any effort or thought or are there plans for VA to sort of have a registry of them to work with them to try to get them—there are some that work cross-purposes. I mean, one group I would worry about is the for-profits, some of the for-profit colleges and university that tend to run up debt for students, veterans and non-veterans alike.

Is there reason for you to manage these or try to manage these or is there an ability to do that with all these non-profits out there, most of whom would generally want to help veterans but do not really have much coordination one with the other?

Mr. SOWERS. Senator Brown, it is a great question. When I was in Ohio with Tom Moe, we had a roundtable meeting with a lot of the local providers there. I think it would be very challenging for us and I am not sure I would want to manage or attempt to manage—

Senator BROWN. I might have used the wrong word. Is there, I mean, tell me about the relationships. How do you look at many of these 40,000? Is there any coordination or advice you give them or anything you can do to sort of make them perform better, if that is the case?

Mr. SOWERS. So, Senator Brown, there are a few things that we have done on this. One is I have sent periodic outreach to Veterans Service Organizations and non-profits to get an understanding of the solutions that they are delivering at the local level.

I think a very key set of relationships we formalized is in the case of the State veterans' affairs directors and then working with the counties and cities as well is working through our local veterans' leaders in those communities who know the solutions, who know the local providers.

Part of my interest is to make sure that the great solutions that are happening, VetCounts being a perfect example which you are doing in Ohio, that the lessons that are being learned there are shared.

So, surfacing those best practices, we are getting those right now through the Association of State Directors.

Senator BROWN. OK. Thank you. I mentioned in my opening statement about 870,000 veterans in Ohio, not many more than half can Ohio State government actually identify by name and location and all of that.

What do you do with States like Ohio? I mean we have 88 county Veteran Service Organizations. We have, as all of us do, many VSOs that are doing terrific work.

How do we reduce that gap so we know where they are, so the State government can communicate with them and let them know of the VA education, health care, homeless services—all of those?

Mr. SOWERS. Senator Brown, thank you very much for that question. We have got to do that, you know, we cannot manage what we cannot measure. And having a clear understanding of where the veterans are, what their demographics are, is a key to any outreach campaign.

So, you are going to start seeing some changes through the VA's Web site. For example, when you come to it, it is going to ask you for your zip code and where you are at. That way we can start customizing messages to veterans of specific regions.

But a key thing I have heard from the States, and we want to deliver, is data on who we are tracking and who they are tracking and getting a good sharing between the two so that we can close that gap.

Senator BROWN. Thank you.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman SANDERS. Thank you. Let me ask one last question. Tell me if I am right on this one. VA standards and eligibility requirements often change. If I have 20 percent disability and my income is X and next year my income is Y, I may at one point be eligible and the next point not be eligible.

Is that a barrier in terms of access to health care that maybe somebody applied and were, at the time ineligible. Then, 3 years later the standard may have changed. Is that a problem for the VA?

Mr. SOWERS. Chairman Sanders, that is a challenge because, as you mentioned, there were veterans that maybe left the service 20–30 years ago when the VA was an administration and not a cabinet level department. It offered different benefits and services.

So, again it is one of the key things of why a campaign like VA Access is critical, to ease the ability of saying this is what the current benefits are. We want to drive people to this site and make the site—we made it more user friendly. We want to continue in that trend.



Chairman SANDERS. There is another issue and I wish I had the book in front of me. It looks like a huge telephone book. But in the State of Vermont, which is a rural State, and incomes and cost of living are different in certain parts of the State, we have one county next to another county; and your income eligibility is different.

So, if I am earning X dollars in Y county, I might be eligible in that county but not another. Does that create problems for VA?

Mr. SOWERS. Chairman Sanders, I would say anytime there is a change in requirements, there is some messaging that needs to go with that. That is why we want to bring in some of the best practices of the private sector here.

Chairman SANDERS. In this case, I am not just faulting the VA. I am faulting maybe us as well. If people know what they are eligible for and are not in all kinds of different levels, it might be easier for the average veteran to say, "yes, I can walk in the door," rather than having been rejected and never coming back again even though he or she may now be eligible.

That was my point. It was not a criticism of VA. But when I see a telephone book for eligible requirements based on different incomes in the State of Vermont, frankly it does not make a whole lot of sense to me.

Senator Burr, any other questions?

Senator BURR. No.

Chairman SANDERS. OK. Dr. Sowers, thank you very much for your testimony.

Mr. SOWERS. Thank you.

Chairman SANDERS. We will have the next panel come up please.

Panelists, thank you very much for being with us. I think what we all recognize and what we have heard from this Committee and from Dr. Sowers is that we cannot do our job or the VA cannot do its job unless it is done not only by a strong outreach effort by VA but also by private non-profits as well and other government agencies. The goal is to bring all of the players together and I know all of you without exception have been actively involved in that.

We thank you very much for the work that you have done. We want your ideas as to how we can improve upon what we do, how we can make the cooperation between the VA and your organizations stronger.

Let us begin. I am delighted to welcome Wendy Spencer, who is the Chief Executive Officer of the Corporation for National and Community Service. Wendy, thanks very much for being with us.

**STATEMENT OF WENDY SPENCER, CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER, CORPORATION FOR NATIONAL AND COMMUNITY SERVICE**

Ms. SPENCER. Thank you so much, Chairman Sanders, Ranking Member Burr, I appreciate the opportunity to testify today. I also want to thank both of you for entrusting me with the honor of serving as the CEO of the Corporation for National and Community Service. I began about a year ago so I am very excited to be in my new role.

We at CNCS share your commitment to serving our veterans and military families. Personally as a wife, a daughter, granddaughter,

and even a stepmother of men who served in four branches of the military, this is very personal to me and it is a priority.

Meeting the needs of our veterans and military families is a national challenge. National service, what we do, is an innovative, cost-effective, and proven solution to this challenge.

We are a grant-making agency built on public-private partnership. Each year we generate an investment of hundreds of millions of dollars in private and other outside resources.

We recruit, mobilize, and manage 80,000 AmeriCorps members, 330,000 Senior Corps participants, and an additional 4.5 million community volunteers.

Through our vast network of grantees and partners, dedicated Americans serve in 70,000 locations across the Nation. They are in schools, faith- and community-based organizations, non-profits, many of which you are familiar with like Habitat for Humanity, Points of Light, American Red Cross, The American Legion Auxiliary, Catholic Charities, and thousands more.

National servicemembers are taking on some of our Nation's most pressing problems, including supporting veterans and the military family community.

Our commitment to veterans and their families is deep and it is actually two-fold. We serve them and we ask them to serve with us. Those strategies are proving to be tremendously beneficial and have great results.

National servicemembers serve at hundreds of VA clinics and hospitals, at Veterans Service Organizations and non-profits. They are connecting veterans to job opportunities, helping them access their benefits, providing peer counseling, mentoring their children, and more. Last year, our program served more than 1.5 million veterans and family members in every State in the country.

Veterans themselves also bring unique skills and leadership to solve problems at home. National service actually gives our veterans a new mission on the home front, a pathway to opportunity if you will, and a better transition to civilian life.

Last year, more than 27,000 veterans served in our programs. In fact, many of our programs are vets helping fellow vets which we find very successful.

In Washington State, for example, the Governor appointed the Commission for National and Community Service and the State's Department of Veterans' Affairs to join together in 2009 to launch an AmeriCorps program called VetCorps.

VetCorps is made up of veterans or military family members. They serve full-time to support veterans enrolled in public colleges across the State. In fact, every public college.

They take their fellow veterans by the hand and assist them with every aspect of their transition. Their mission is to never leave a veteran behind and to help them succeed in college and in life. I am pleased to report that it is working.

Last year, 31 AmeriCorps members in VetCorps served 7,100 veterans. Nine out of every ten of these veterans served reported to us they had better understanding of how to navigate college and use their VA benefits.

Early results show us that VetCorps members have substantially boosted the number of veterans on track to graduate from college, a goal that we all share.

In conclusion, let me tell you about Mike Bremer. Mike is an Iraq war veteran who served in AmeriCorps as a member of an all-veteran fire team in Colorado. Mike said, and these are his words, "When I returned from Iraq with the Army infantry, I felt like I lost all meaning and purpose in life and I had trouble finding meaningful work. My AmeriCorps experience gave me new purpose and a valuable new skill set. I received incredible training and experience through AmeriCorps."

I am pleased to share with you today that Mike now has a full-time job as a firefighter with the U.S. Forest Service. I called Mike yesterday to tell him I was going to share his message with you, and he is doing quite well.

Mike found his new mission and we know what ours is.

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Burr, we are poised, ready, committed, dedicated to work with each of you and each Member of this Committee and the VA to serve our veterans and their families as well as they have served each of us. We hope you will consider national service as an important part of the solution.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. As a moment of privilege, I would like to thank my colleagues here, grantees and partners in the room, and especially my senior advisor for veterans issues, Koby Langley, who is an Iraq war veteran, Bronze Star Recipient, and served as a former Command Judge Advocate who is advising me and helping us grow services to veterans and the military family.

Thank you very much.

[The prepared statement of Ms. Spencer follows:]

PREPARED STATEMENT OF WENDY SPENCER, CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER,  
CORPORATION FOR NATIONAL AND COMMUNITY SERVICE (CNCS)

Chairman Sanders, Ranking Member Burr, and Members of the Committee: Thank you for the opportunity to testify today.

I am Wendy Spencer, Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS). I have had the privilege of serving in this role since April 2012, following my nomination by President Obama and unanimous confirmation by the U.S. Senate. I thank the Members of this Committee for your faith and confidence in me and for this honor you have entrusted to me.

I have forged my career in volunteer management and administration over the past three decades. Prior to this appointment, I served as CEO of the Florida Governor's Commission on Volunteerism and Service under Governors Bush, Crist, and Scott, and am therefore honored to be the first CEO of CNCS to come directly from the national service field. I am also honored to be the first in this position to testify before this full Committee.

I was grateful for your invitation and am here today because CNCS shares your commitment to serving our veterans and military families. As a Nation, we are tasked to meet the needs of the 1.5 million servicemembers hanging up their uniforms for the last time and transitioning to civilian life in the next five years, as well as the military families who have borne so much of the burden during the long and protracted years of war.

The good news I have to report is that Americans have answered the call to serve in countless ways to support our military service men and women, veterans, and their families. As the Obama Administration's Joining Forces initiative makes clear, this is not a challenge for government, alone; it is a challenge for all of us who live safer, freer, and more secure because of the sacrifice of these heroes. National service is an innovative, cost-effective, and proven solution to this challenge.

During my testimony, I will discuss who we are, our commitment to our Nation's heroes, and how national service is poised to play an even greater role in helping our returning servicemembers and their families transition back to civilian life.

#### ABOUT THE CORPORATION FOR NATIONAL AND COMMUNITY SERVICE

CNCS is a Federal agency that engages millions of Americans in service each year through our signature national service programs, AmeriCorps and Senior Corps, and innovative programs such as the Social Innovation Fund and Volunteer Generation Fund that take community-based solutions to scale. We also lead the President's national call to service initiative, United We Serve.

Our programs bring human capital to America's civic infrastructure. This includes more than:

- 80,000 AmeriCorps members;
- 330,000 Senior Corps volunteers; and
- 4.5 million community volunteers recruited, managed, and mobilized by our national servicemembers and call to service initiatives.

We are unique in that we are a public-private partnership. We work with a vast network of grantees and partners to get things done in communities across the country. And we generate the investment of hundreds of millions in private and non-CNCS funds every year.

Through our AmeriCorps and Senior Corps programs, dedicated citizens of all ages and backgrounds are serving hands-on and in many cases full-time at 70,000 locations nationwide, including schools, faith- and community-based organizations, state and local public agencies, and venerable nonprofits such as Points of Light, Habitat for Humanity, American Red Cross, United Way, Catholic Charities, and the American Legion Auxiliary.

Every day, these national servicemembers tackle complex societal challenges on the ground, such as helping youth stay on track to graduate; fighting poverty; responding to disasters; restoring parks; bringing life back to forgotten neighborhoods; and connecting veterans and military families to the services they need and the benefits they have earned, which is the challenge that unites us here today. It's working; we see results of national service each and every day.

National service is based on the idea that our Nation's greatest asset is our citizens. When Americans are civically engaged and empowered, no challenge is insurmountable. That is why CNCS is proud to lead the Federal effort to support, strengthen, and scale America's volunteer sector through national service, and help address some of the most pressing issues facing our Nation.

#### NATIONAL AND COMMUNITY SERVICE COMMITMENT TO VETERANS AND MILITARY FAMILIES

As the Members of this Committee and the witnesses of this panel know, one such pressing national issue is meeting the needs of our transitioning military and their families. I am the wife, daughter, granddaughter, and stepmother of men who have served our country in four branches of the military, so this is very personal to me and I understand the challenge.

Further, this generation of American veterans presents new challenges which are uniquely served by national servicemembers, volunteers, and fellow veterans and military family members.

The bipartisan Edward M. Kennedy Serve America Act of 2009 (Serve America Act) was landmark legislation that focused national service on key national priorities, including veterans and military families. In the spirit and the letter of the Serve America Act, the CNCS 2011–2015 Strategic Plan set goals, strategies, and objectives to support the veteran and military family community.

Our commitment to veterans and military families begins in large part by who we choose to lead our efforts. In 2011, we chose a two-tour combat veteran of Kosovo and Iraq, and the recipient of the Bronze Star, Koby Langley, as Senior Advisor for Wounded Warrior, Veteran, and Military Family Initiatives at CNCS. Koby has served our country with distinction as a public servant in the Army, as a special assistant to the Secretary of Veterans Affairs, and most recently as a senior executive in the Department of Defense (DOD) where he advised on wounded warrior and transition policy, led in the interagency development of the Veterans Job Bank, as well as the first ever DOD wounded warrior employment initiative. Today, our investments in supporting the veteran and military family community have never been stronger.

Our commitment to this community is twofold. We directly serve veterans and their families through national service, and we recruit and enroll veterans and their families to serve in national service programs. We have seen success on both fronts.

*Serving Veterans and Military Families Through National Service*

Our AmeriCorps members and Senior Corps volunteers, serving at the community level, are the face and helping hands of a grateful Nation. These national service members serve at hundreds of Department of Veterans (VA) Affairs facilities, including clinics, community centers, and 80 hospitals; veteran service organizations; and nonprofits such as Blue Star Families and Operation Homefront.

They perform a wide range of service activities on a daily basis to support veterans and their families, including raising awareness of benefits among veterans and helping them navigate the application process; connecting them to critical wellness and support services such as legal assistance, health care, job training, and affordable housing; or providing transportation to the nearest VA hospital or other medical appointments, to job counseling or interviews, and to take care of personal needs by running household errands.

Examples of our grantees in action include:

- Metropolitan Community College in Omaha, Nebraska, which utilizes the anti-poverty, capacity-building arm of AmeriCorps—AmeriCorps VISTA (Volunteers in Service to America)—to help veterans and their families transition from a life in the military to a life in the classroom. The VISTA members have set up resource guides and a Web site specifically for student veterans, compiled a list of faculty members with military experience, and facilitated the student veterans' transition to the local community through service events such as the September 11th National Day of Service and Remembrance.

- The city of Raleigh, North Carolina, which places two AmeriCorps VISTA members at the Raleigh Business and Technology Center. These VISTAs wrote, submitted, and were awarded an \$851K grant from the North Carolina Department of Transportation and the Workforce Development Commission. The grant supports a cross-sector collaboration with the largest solar panel company in the state, providing veterans access to a 144-hour Solar Electrical Technician Certification Course, a Lineman Certification Course, a 200-hour pre-apprentice program, and support with transportation and job placements. This partnership is creating a pathway to education, green jobs, and transportation assistance for approximately 200 veterans.

- The LifeBridge Veteran AmeriCorps program in West Virginia, which provides peer-to-peer mentoring, life and job skills training, information and referral services, as well as financial literacy guidance to veterans, homeless individuals, or those at risk of becoming homeless. The program has been critical to helping fill gaps in resources for the state's veteran population. Last year, AmeriCorps members serving in the LifeBridge program drove documented increases in job skills among the population they served, recruited hundreds of volunteers, and provided direct support services to 200 members of the veteran and military family community in West Virginia.

Through these and other programs, last year approximately 1.5 million veterans and military family members across every state were impacted by the service of AmeriCorps members and Senior Corps volunteers. Since implementation of the Serve America Act over the past three years, CNCS has awarded national service grants to more than 240 organizations in more than 400 communities across the country to serve the veteran and military family community.<sup>1</sup>

CNCS and our national service programs are developing good ideas, promising practices, and effective programs and initiatives that make a meaningful difference for veterans and military families and taking them to scale. This includes:

- The Community Blueprint, which began as collaboration between AmeriCorps VISTA members working with the American Legion Auxiliary, and has since grown into a multi-state initiative led by our grantee, the Points of Light.

- Operation Honor Card, which has solicited and documented pledges of 25.8 million hours of service by Americans in support of veterans and military families. Operation Honor Card is a joint project of the CNCS, Blue Star Families, American Red Cross, Points of Light, and ServiceNation. With more than 22.4 million of these service hours having already been served, Operation Honor Card has raised awareness of the strength and challenges of our servicemembers and represents the commitment of communities and citizens nationwide who have come together to assist veterans and military families by writing letters of appreciation, sending care packages, hosting donation drives, organizing welcome home events, feeding homeless veterans, tutoring and mentoring military children, and much more.

<sup>1</sup>A complete list of veteran and military family-oriented grantees supported since 2010 is provided as Appendix A to this testimony.

- A new partnership with Delaware Governor Jack Markell, chairman of the National Governors Association, and the National Guard Bureau, which will place AmeriCorps members in Delaware and locations across the country as part of Joining Community Forces. The partnership will strengthen National Guard support services for guardsmen and their families at risk of homelessness, joblessness, or otherwise in need of economic stability assistance by providing access to AmeriCorps VISTA members for all 54 states and territories. I was proud to join the Governor and Senators Carper and Coons last month to announce this partnership.

*Recruiting and Enrolling Veterans and Military Families in National Service*

National service is also a unique and effective way to tap the talent and leadership skills of veterans to solve problems at home.

More than 17,000 veterans have served in AmeriCorps since its inception in 1994. And last year alone, more than 26,000 veterans served through Senior Corps. Veterans bring the skills they acquired in the service to continue serving on the homefront through AmeriCorps and Senior Corps—responding to disasters, building homes, mentoring at-risk youth, and supporting other veterans and their families.

Veterans of all ages have demonstrated a desire to serve their country both in and out of the service and this continues to be true for our youngest generation of veterans. A landmark report by Civic Enterprises found that younger veterans are eager to continue serving, and that veterans who volunteer have more successful transitions home than those who do not.<sup>2</sup>

This is proven true in national service programs. In a recent VISTA member exit survey, 80 percent of members reported that their participation in national service helped them reconnect with community activities in civilian life.<sup>3</sup>

Further, our national service field research shows that veterans and their families are more likely to accept assistance offered by an individual affiliated with the military than a well-intentioned civilian,<sup>4</sup> so this distinctive national service model—Vets helping Vets—has seen tremendous success.

Examples of our grantees in action include:

- The Washington state Vet Corps, an innovative program launched in 2009 by the Washington Commission for National and Community Service and the Washington Department of Veterans Affairs, which engages veterans and military family members in AmeriCorps to support and boost the graduation rates of student veterans enrolled under the Post-9/11 GI Bill. Last year, the 31 members in Washington's VetCorps served 7,100 veterans across the state. Nine out of every 10 (93 percent) of the veterans they served reported that, because of VetCorps, they better understand how to use their VA benefits and how to navigate the college environment. And early results show that VetCorps members have substantially boosted the number of veterans on track to graduate from college.

- Formative nonprofits serving the veteran community such as the Mission Continues, Service Nation, and Team Rubicon, which have leveraged national service to expand their service model and to highlight veterans as civic assets and leaders in their communities. For example, after a 20 year military career, Ernest "Cal" Verdin is now an AmeriCorps VISTA member serving as a Regional Director of Team Rubicon. In response to Hurricane Sandy, Cal led the volunteer management efforts in Rockaway, New York, which included approximately 300 Team Rubicon volunteers and 10,000 community volunteers in recovery efforts over a five-week period.

- The Community Anti-Drug Coalitions of America (CADCA), which in partnership with the National Guard Bureau's Prevention, Treatment, and Outreach Program, launched its own VetCorps to fight substance abuse, addiction, and other challenges facing returning veterans. According to the DOD Millennium Cohort Study, 22 percent of National Guard members were problem drinkers and 29 percent had financial problems. The CADCA VetCorps program places AmeriCorps members, particularly military service personnel and veterans, in CADCA's substance abuse prevention coalitions throughout the country to mitigate these problems. More than 100 AmeriCorps members will deploy to support returning guardsmen and reservists as they face behavioral health challenges.

<sup>2</sup>*All Volunteer Force: From Military to Civilian Service*. Civic Enterprises. Published November 2009.

<sup>3</sup>*VISTA Member Exit Survey: September 2011-November 2012*. Survey results and testimonials of veterans serving in VISTA are provided as Appendix B to this testimony.

<sup>4</sup>*Understanding the Involvement of Veterans and Military Families in National Service*. A field assessment report prepared for the Corporation for National and Community Service by Westat. February 2013.

- The Southwest Conservation Corps, which provides opportunities for veterans to serve as team leaders maintaining and responding to wild-fires on national lands, and launched an all-Veterans Fire Corps in 2010. As an AmeriCorps member in the Corps, Mike Bremer worked in three districts of the San Juan National Forest and for the New Mexico Bureau of Land Management. He showed stellar performance and leadership, was recognized nationally as Corps Member of the Year, and was promoted to a crew leader—a precursor to his now full-time job as a firefighter with the U.S. Forest Service. Mike explained, “When I returned from Iraq with the Army Infantry, I felt like I lost all meaning and purpose in life and I had trouble finding meaningful work. My Corps experience gave me new purpose and a valuable new skillset. I received incredible training and experience alongside other veterans who had similar experiences—we were all looking for a new life after war.”

Through these and other programs, national service engages veterans and their families in a new mission on the home front.

Recognizing the unique skills and leadership abilities of America’s veterans, as well as the benefits of national service to veterans and military families, CNCS and our network of grantees have stepped up our efforts to recruit these heroes to serve in our programs. We have partnered with the U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation to participate in more than 50 “Hiring Our Heroes” job fairs across the country. Additionally, a number of AmeriCorps grantees, including Teach for America, Volunteers of America, the Washington Conservation Corps, and the St. Bernard Project, have launched veteran recruiting efforts for their AmeriCorps positions, and in some cases reserved positions specifically for veterans.

#### NATIONAL SERVICE WORKS FOR VETERANS AND MILITARY FAMILIES

National service works for veterans and their families. It is an innovative, cost-effective, and proven solution to many of the challenges facing our Nation’s heroes, from accessing benefits and services to utilizing the Post-9/11 GI Bill to reintegrating to civilian life.

As referenced earlier in this testimony, CNCS has provided historic levels of support to the military community in recent years. Yet we have still not fully realized the potential of national service to meet this pressing need. As the Federal agency charged with expanding impactful, community-based solutions to serve veterans and military families, we are poised to do more to continue and expand our efforts to serve and engage veterans.

CNCS’ unique value is a “triple bottom line” return on investment: National service benefits those who serve, those who are served, and the larger community and Nation. We have:

- *Capability*: We are the only Federal agency with access to such a vast network of grantees, community-based partners, national servicemembers, and volunteers that improve the lives of Americans every day.

- *Authority*: The bipartisan Serve America Act gave us the authority and expectation to expand services to veteran and military families and coordinate activities with the VA and other Federal agencies.

- *Accountability*: CNCS is committed to the highest level of accountability through oversight of our grantees and national service participants, as well as by using performance measures and evaluations to ensure that our programs have real and quantifiable impact.

- *Ability to Leverage Non-Federal Resources*: Our grants to nonprofits, schools, and other community-based organizations are often required to be matched with funding from local, private, and non-CNCS partners. And our national servicemembers mobilize millions of community volunteers alongside them.

The success of CNCS and our national servicemembers is beyond measure in both the lives of the individuals and communities they serve and those who commit to serving. We recognize that servicemembers, veterans, and their families face unique challenges and we believe CNCS has a cost-effective model efficiently serving many of their needs. We also understand there is more to do and know that with a fully funded interagency service Corps, we could provide support services to even more servicemembers, veterans, and their families. An example of this is FEMA Corps, a partnership between CNCS and FEMA that created a specialized unit of AmeriCorps National Civilian Community Corps. This partnership is projected to save FEMA and taxpayers more than \$60 million per year. Additionally, CNCS and the Department of Education launched School Turnaround AmeriCorps to place AmeriCorps members in persistently underachieving schools across the country. With these models we are in discussions with several Federal agencies—including VA—to help them accomplish their mission through national service.

The CNCS commitment to veterans and military families has never been greater, and we stand ready to do more. We look forward to working with this Committee, the VA, and other partners across every sector that are committed to serving our veterans and their families as well as they have served us.

Again, thank you for the opportunity to testify today.

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APPENDIX A.—NONPROFIT AND STATE-BASED INITIATIVES SUPPORTED BY THE CORPORATION FOR NATIONAL AND COMMUNITY SERVICE SERVING VETERANS AND MILITARY FAMILIES

American Red Cross Oregon Trail Chapter	• Big Brothers Big Sisters of America
WA State Employment Security Department	• Blue Star Families
Vermont Student Assistance Corporation	• Give an Hour
St. Bernard Project	• Madison Street Veterans Association
Lutheran Family Services of Nebraska	• Military Officers Association of America
AMVETS Career Center	• National Military Family Association
Great Basin Institute	• Operation Homefront
CA Dept. Veterans Affairs	• Ride 2 Recovery
Goodwill Industries of the Southern Rivers, Inc.	• Senior Volunteer Services
Georgia Perimeter College	• Still Serving Veterans
Spartanburg County, SC School District 7	• Student Veterans of America
American Red Cross, St. Joseph County Chapter	• TN Community Assistance Corporation
Ministry of Caring Inc.	• The Mission Continues
Affordable Housing and Homeless Alliance	• Veterans Innovation Center
Volunteers of America of Illinois	American Red Cross of Greater NY
Lessie Bates Davis Neighborhood House	Billings Metro VISTA Project, city of Billings
Virginia Department of Veterans Services	Brain Injury Association of Utah
The Piney Woods School	CA Conservation Corps (CCC) Vet Green Corps
Family Services of Butler Memorial Hospital	CareConnect RSVP
United Way of Central West Virginia	Central Iowa Shelter Services
Arizona Board of Regents OBO N. Arizona University	city of Charleston
American Red Cross Southern Arizona Chapter	city of Houston
Waynesville RVI School District	Communities In Action VISTA Project
Idaho Department of Labor	Community Action Association of PA
Rhode Island School of Design	Community Human Services Corporation
Iowa Dept. of Natural Resources	Community Renewal Team
Washington County Youth Service Bureau	Families in Transition
IHOM LifeCorp AmeriCorps	George Washington University
Utah Conservation Corps	Georgia 4H Foundation
Goodwill Industries of Greater Grand Rapids, Inc.	Habitat for Humanity International
Tennessee's Community Assistance Corp.	Hands on Volunteer Network of the Valley
Washington Campus Compact	HandsOn Greater Phoenix
WestCare Foundation, Inc.	Idaho National Guard
Rebuilding Together, Inc.	Legal Aid Society
Habitat for Humanity International, Inc.	Maine Commission for Community Service
WA State Department of Veterans Affairs	Maryland Campus Compact
Utah Campus Compact	Metropolitan Community College
Public Allies, Inc.	Military Family Research Institute
Minnesota Council on Crime and Justice	Minnesota Campus Compact
National Association for Public Interest Law	Mission Solano Rescue Mission
Community Anti-Drug Coalitions of America	Montana Legal Services Association
New Sector Alliance, Inc.	Municipality of Maunabo, Office of VA
American Legion Auxiliary National Headquarters	National Alliance on Mental Illness—TN
• American Red Cross National Headquarters	NC Association of Community Development Corporations
• American Red Cross, South Florida Region	New Directions, Inc.
	New London Homeless Hospitality Center
	North Dakota State University
	Ohio Campus Compact/University of Akron
	Pathways PA
	Prescott College
	Prevention Resource Center
	Rural Advancement Foundation International
	South Carolina Office of Rural Health

St. Stephen's Human Services  
 Tabor Community Services, Inc.  
 The American Legion Auxiliary National  
   VISTA Community Anti-Drug  
   Coalitions of America  
 The Service Collaboration of Western NY  
 United Way of Central Kentucky  
 United Way of the CSRA, Inc.  
 University of Arizona  
 University of Arkansas Cooperative  
   Extension  
 University of Wisconsin Extension 4-H  
 Utah National Guard  
 "Veterans Health Administration"  
 Volunteer WV—the WV Commission  
 Volunteers of America, Dakotas  
 Washington County Youth Service  
   Bureau  
 Waynesville Public Schools  
 West Alabama Chapter of American Red  
   Cross  
 Yakima County—Department of Human  
   Services  
  
 Adamsville Lion's Club  
 Alexian Brother Senior Neighbors  
 Alexian Brother Senior Neighbors  
 Alpert Jewish Community Center/  
   American Red Cross, Lowcountry  
   Chapter  
 Agency on Aging—Bloomington RSVP  
 Area Agency on Aging: Region 1  
 city of Miles City (6 RSVP projects)  
 Athens-Limestone RSVP  
 Baltimore City  
 Baltimore County  
 Black Hills State University  
 Brooke County Senior Center  
 Bryan County RSVP  
 Butler County RSVP  
 Calcasieu Parish Police Jury RSVP  
 CareConnect RSVP  
 Cascade County, District IX HRDCCASE  
   RSVP  
 CASE RSVP  
 Catholic Charities of Jackson, Michigan  
 Catholic Charities of Onondaga County  
 Catholic Charities of SW Ohio/Cincinnati  
   RSVP  
 Catholic Charities of the Diocese of  
   Ogdensburg  
 Cattaraugus County Department of the  
   Aging  
 Central Vermont Council on Aging  
 Centre County Commissioners  
 Cheyenne Housing Authority  
 city of Alamogordo  
 city of Albuquerque  
 city of Jacksonville  
 city of Kosciusko  
 city of Mitchell  
 city of Rapid City  
 city of Santa Fe RSVP  
 city of Waveland  
 Clarksville/Montgomery County CAC  
 Clinch Valley Community Action  
 Coahoma Opportunities, Inc.  
 Coastal Community Action Program  
  
 Coles Council County on Aging  
 Collier County  
 Columbia River Fire and Rescue  
 Coming of Age—Bay Area/RSVP of San  
   Francisco and Alameda Counties  
 Community Service Society  
 Community Services Council  
 Conejo Recreation and Park District  
   Connections, Inc.  
 Cornell Cooperative Extension  
 Council of the Southern Mountains  
   RSVP  
 County of Bucks—Area Agency on Aging  
 Covenant Medical Center  
 Cumberland County Coordinating  
   Council on Older Adults  
 Decorah Public Library  
 Deming Luna County Commission on  
   Aging  
 DOVE, Inc.  
 Durham Community Technical College  
 Dutchess County Community Action  
   Partnership  
 East Bay Community Action Program  
 Erie County Department for Senior  
   Services  
 Experience, Inc.  
 Family and Community Christian  
   Association  
 Family Services of Champaign County  
 Federal Hill House  
 Four County Mental Health Center  
   RSVP  
 Friends of Suffolk Co. RSVP/ Suffolk  
   ESVP  
 Garland County Council on Aging  
 Harford County RSVP  
 Highland Community College  
 Human Services Council  
 Hutchinson Community College RSVP  
 Iberia Council on Aging RSVP  
 INCA RSVP  
 Interfaith Older Adult Programs  
 Iowa Lakes Community College  
 Kauai County Agency on Elderly Affairs  
 KI BOIS Community Action Foundation,  
   INC.  
 Klein and Stiffle Jewish Community  
   Centers  
 Lake County CAP  
 Land-of-Sky Regional Council  
 Lawton RSVP  
 Lincoln/Kit Carson County RSVP  
 Lorain County Office on Aging  
 Louisville-Jefferson Co Metro  
 Lower Eastern Shore RSVP  
 Lowndes County Council on Aging, Inc.  
 Luzerne/Wyoming Counties' Bureau For  
   Aging  
 McLennan County Community College  
 Mesa County RSVP  
 Mid-Florida Community Services  
 Montgomery County  
 Mountain States Group, Inc.  
 New Castle County RSVP  
 New Hanover County  
 North Coast Opportunities

North Dakota State University  
 North Iowa Area Community College  
 Northern Arizona University  
 Olympic Community Action Program  
 Osceola Co. Council on Aging  
 Paducah-McCracken County Senior  
 Citizens  
 Pennyrile Allied Community Services  
 Philadelphia Corporation for Aging  
 Pima Council on Aging  
 Positive Maturity, Inc.  
 Prime Plus, Norfolk Senior Center  
 Rocky Mountain Development Council,  
 Area  
 VIA Agency on Aging, city of Miles City  
 RSVP in Oklahoma  
 RSVP in Pottawatomie County  
 RSVP of Central OK, Inc.  
 RSVP of Dane County, Inc.  
 RSVP of Kay County  
 RSVP of Montgomery County  
 RSVP of the Flint Hills  
 RSVP of Volunteer Center of Los  
 Angeles  
 RSVP Tulsa  
 Sacramento Cty. Dept. of Human  
 Assistance  
 Senior Action, Inc.  
 Senior Citizens Association  
 Senior Connections  
 Senior Friendship Centers  
 RSVP of the Central Coast  
 Sierra Joint Office on Aging  
 South Florida Community College  
 Southwestern IL College  
 SOWEGA Council on Aging  
 St. Mary County RSVP  
 Stuttgart Chamber of Commerce  
 Stuttgart—North Arkansas County  
 RSVP  
 Sumter Senior Services  
 TN Opportunity Programs, Inc.  
 Triton College  
 United Way of Martin County  
 Upper East TN HAD  
 Utah National Guard  
 Venango County Commissioners  
 Village of Ruidoso  
 Volunteer Macon  
 Volunteers of America—Northern  
 Colorado  
 Volunteers of America of New Orleans  
 RSVP  
 Volunteers of America of Minnesota  
 Volunteers of America RSVP Program  
 Volunteers of America, Dakotas  
 Wayne County Action Program Inc.  
 Western IL AAA  
 Yadkin Economic Development District,  
 Inc.  
 Yellowstone County Council on Aging,  
 York County Council on Aging  
 YWCA of McLean County

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## APPENDIX B.—VISTA MEMBER EXIT SURVEY: SEPTEMBER 2011-NOVEMBER 2012

VISTA members are an integral component of the anti-poverty mission of the AmeriCorps VISTA program. Not only do members support VISTA projects in carrying out programs to overcome poverty, they also help organizations that sponsor VISTA projects build capacity and support services and maintain grounded connections with the communities they serve.

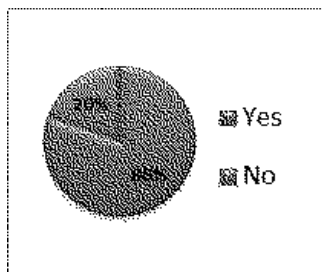
In an effort to empower and validate the contributions of our VISTAs, we ask them to fill in the Member Satisfaction Survey when they complete their service. The survey is an important tool for us to gain an understanding of the satisfaction with the VISTA program and to identify the training and support needs of the active VISTA member.

The survey is also an important tool for us to measure how best we can support VISTAs who are veterans of the U.S. military. The results of the Member Satisfaction Survey are overwhelmingly positive among VISTAs who are veterans.

- Nearly 78% of members who are veterans rate their overall experience of serving with AmeriCorps VISTA as 'extremely satisfied' or 'satisfied'.
- 80% of members who are veterans state that participation in national service helped them reconnect with community activities in civilian life.

**Survey Question:** Has your participation in national service helped you reconnect with community activities in civilian life?

## RESPONSES BY VISTA WHO ARE VETERANS



## COMMENTS BY AMERICORPS VISTA MEMBERS WHO ARE VETERANS

I was very shy, and I had low self-esteem issues. AmeriCorps VISTA service taught me that I can do whatever I put my mind to. It exposed me to new avenues in life I would have never thought I could travel.

*Veteran in Cleveland, OH*

Being an AmeriCorps VISTA fulfills the desire I've had for years to become a servant in the Army, Marine, or Navy. I was rejected years ago because of my diabetes. It is a true honor to be a part of the Corporation for National and Community Service.

*Veteran in Columbus, OH*

My AmeriCorps VISTA experience was defining. Before joining VISTA, I had no confidence at all. I had been on disability for 15 years, and I had tried to find work, but alas no results. I really thought I would never find anything. Couple that with the fact that I never really thought I had accomplished anything in my life, and AmeriCorps service was really defining for me.

*Veteran in Vancouver, WA*

The experience of working with the youth of the community has helped me make the decision to pursue a new job working with the youth.

*Veteran in Caldwell, ID*

My AmeriCorps service helped me to realize that I can make a difference to those who are less fortunate and living in low income communities. Therefore, I decided while doing my service that I would go back to school. I am now getting my Master's degree in Public Administration.

*Veteran in Montgomery, AL*

It helped me determine that I want a career in the nonprofit sector.

*Veteran in Tuscaloosa, AL*

It has helped me define myself as a person and my beliefs.

*Veteran in Washington, DC.*

My year of AmeriCorps service changed my life and helped me to realize that I belong in public service.

*Veteran in Ashland, KY*

My experience with AmeriCorps confirmed to me that my choice to become a social worker was the right choice. Helping homeless veterans helped me understand that this is exactly what I want to do for the rest of my life. I will always be grateful for this experience because of that. This experience will stay with me for the rest of my life.

*Veteran in Washington, DC.*

I realized that I have the capacity, willingness, ability, and skills to pursue my graduate program and be a psychologist and work in low-income communities, particularly with minority groups.

*Veteran in Emmitsburg, MD*

It has confirmed my belief in continuing to help my fellow man/woman in any way that I can. Also, it has reaffirmed my deep belief in God, that we are all his creation, and that we all should be concerned about the welfare of others.

*Veteran in Wyandotte, MI*

I learned that \* \* \* if you continue to make one small difference at a time, you eventually make a big difference. This was a very important lesson that I took away from my service experience.

*Veteran in Beckley, WV*

Experiencing diversity whether it was race, culture, or economic status, taught me to always remember that people come from different situations and to never be judgmental toward someone.

*Veteran in Madison, WI*

I never knew how much children depended on people other than their parents until I worked in an alternative school. I saw how the feeling of "no one cares" affects children. It is something that will stay with me forever. It made the decision for me to become an educator.

*Veteran in Hampton, VA*

After my service as a VISTA volunteer, I thought I could return to my career as a computer programmer and put volunteering out of my mind. I did return to programming, but I ended up leaving the field again to obtain a Master of Divinity. I'm now a community-based Chaplain!

*Veteran in Kissimmee, FL*

When I came into VISTA, I was in a dark place after my military service, trying to find my place and reintegrate into my community. VISTA helped me do just that. Now I am moving into employment, my next step as a disabled veteran and Wounded Warrior. I am so very thankful to VISTA and United Way for their patience and help. I am forever grateful for this experience.

*Veteran in Augusta, GA*

My VISTA experience was making myself a better person, being a part of a compassionate community, and doing something important in my life.

*Veteran in Baton Rouge, LA*

As a veteran, I would like to continue \* \* \* to help others in these and future times. I feel AmeriCorps VISTA is the perfect opportunity to do so.

*Veteran in Columbus, OH*

I have not had a full-time job in almost 20 years. My AmeriCorps service helped show me that I was capable, employable. It showed me that if I focus on an issue and I receive the proper training, experience, and positive feedback, then there is nothing I can't do. I have been honored to serve my community \* \* \* and those in need connect to agencies and organizations that are there to provide services.

*Veteran in Washington, DC.*

It gave me an idea of what I like, what I need from a work environment, and the balance that I must have in my life in order to function at my best on the job, especially, as a veteran with PTSD.

*Veteran in Atlanta, GA*

Chairman SANDERS. Thank you very much, Ms. Spencer.

Secretary Coleman Nee from the Department of Veterans' Services for The Commonwealth of Massachusetts is our next panelist.

The reason we asked you to come is that we have heard you are doing as good a job as any State in the country in terms of providing services to veterans, and we want to see what we can learn from you.

Thank you very much for being with us, Mr. Nee.

**STATEMENT OF COLEMAN NEE, DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS' SERVICES, THE COMMONWEALTH OF MASSACHUSETTS**

Mr. NEE. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. We do an excellent job in Massachusetts which I would like to take credit for but I cannot. I have an outstanding team that does phenomenal work every day. So, I will pass on your thanks to them.

Before we begin, I would also like to thank you, this Committee, the Federal Government, and the VA, as Dr. Sowers mentioned, providing resources, thoughts and prayers to those of us in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, and in particular the city of Boston over the last 2 weeks.

My name is Coleman Nee and I am Secretary of Veteran Services for the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. I want to thank the Chairman and the Members for the opportunity to address you and speak about the important role State departments of veterans' services can and do play in order to ensure we are providing the highest quality of benefits and services to our veterans and their families.

On behalf of Governor Deval Patrick and Lieutenant Governor Timothy Murray, I am proud that Massachusetts is a leader in providing veterans' benefits and services.

Some of our highlights include the fact that by State law we mandate a vet service officer to every city or town in the Commonwealth. We provide over \$70 million in State taxpayer funds in direct financial benefits to veterans and dependents. We launched a first-in-the-nation Web portal for veterans benefits, called MassVetsAdvisor.org.

We collaborate with the our Division of Career Services to maximize employment opportunities for every veteran; and we are offering unique peer support programs in the area of veteran suicide prevention, crisis intervention, and ending homelessness.

The greatest emphasis we have, and I think it has been highlighted here today, is that we placed a collaboration between Federal, State, municipal, and private NGO's and non-profits to ensure we are creating meaningful partnerships to maximize resources and provide the finest benefits and services this country has to offer and that all of our veterans most assuredly have earned.

In Massachusetts, we found that there is not always a lack of resources for veterans and their families. In fact, the biggest impediment is accessing the benefits and lack of knowledge of those benefits and how to navigate the various bureaucracies associated with those benefits.

To that end, we have instituted a number of programs over the past few years to increase access, knowledge, and navigation of those resources and benefits and we feel some of these could serve as national models.

Included in this is our SAVE program, Statewide Advocacy for Veterans Empowerment Team. SAVE is a collaboration with our

Massachusetts Department of Public Health, Suicide Prevention Bureau. It is comprised of veterans or family members of veterans who have lived through similar transitions and can use their experiences to build a rapport with veterans and/or veteran family member.

It offers peer-to-peer crisis intervention coupled with resource navigation to advocate for veterans who are not able to obtain the benefits they have earned due to institutional or personal barriers.

In fiscal year 2012, we provided direct outreach to over 1,400 veterans in Massachusetts; 234 of those veterans received direct referral and linkage services; 94 veterans received active case management with 10 of those individuals receiving case management for "critical incidences."

I can assure you that the young men and women who work on that team have guaranteed that they are men and women who are veterans of the Commonwealth who are alive today who I doubt may be alive were it not for the help and assistance that this team provided.

Based on the success of this, we have migrated this approach to peer support to the area of ending veterans homelessness.

In our Statewide Housing and Advocacy for Reintegration and Prevention Team or SHARP is an effort and a collaboration between the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs and the VA's Center for Ending Veterans' Homelessness, accomplishing through peer support, mental health services, psychiatric evaluations, and linkages to emergency shelters at Vet Center facilities as well as non-profits.

We are enrolling more veterans in our HUD-VASH program. We are housing them quicker. We are keeping them housed permanently. Our rate of working with these veterans through peer support and maintaining their ability to access services not only has resulted in a 27 percent decrease in the amount of homeless veterans over the past 2 years but it is resulting in significant cost savings as these veterans are accessing more efficient and more effective treatment and permanent supportive housing rather than continuing through the system of going from shelter to shelter and services to services without any coordinated effort.

Our Women Veterans Network continues to increase outreach and direct services. We are very proud of our Women Veterans Network. There are over 27,000 women veterans in the Commonwealth. Women are the fastest growing segment of our veterans' population, and access to outreach and benefits and services for women is more critical than ever.

We produce annual newsletters. We are holding our fifth annual Statewide women's veterans conference this June. We do many networking events, and we hold a Women Veterans Appreciation Day where we award the outstanding woman veteran of the year award, the Deborah Sampson Award, to a different woman veteran each year. Last year our Women Veterans Network provided direct case work and referral services to over 500 women veterans alone.

Finally, our MassVetsAdvisor.org Web site which was started with \$1 million in Federal funding supported through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act. It is a collaboration between

the Mass Technology Collaborative, the Home Base Program, and the Red Sox Foundation.

That is a one-stop resource that streamlines the data of over 400 benefits and services from Federal, State, and local non-profits under one Web portal easy to search based on your time of service, when you served, and branch of service.

So in closing, I would say that the State Department of Veteran's Services operates at the community level and in conjunction with the numerous other human service agencies and providers.

This model allows us to be in tune with local resources and programs that can provide on-the-ground critical resources to ensure no veteran or family member is denied access to services.

In closing, I would like to thank the Committee for the opportunity to testify here today and encourage you to examine our State programs and services for best practices. We feel that in collaboration with the Department of Veterans Affairs we can provide the finest resources and care for our veterans and their family members going forward.

Thank you.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Nee follows:]

PREPARED STATEMENT OF COLEMAN NEE, SECRETARY,  
MASSACHUSETTS DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS' SERVICES

Good morning Chairman Sanders and Honorable Members of the Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs. My name is Coleman Nee and I am Secretary of the Massachusetts Department of Veterans' Services.

I want to thank the Chairman and the Members for this opportunity to address you and speak about the important role state departments of veterans' services can and do play in order to ensure we are providing the highest quality benefits and services to our veterans and their families.

On behalf of Governor Deval Patrick and Lt. Governor Timothy Murray, I am proud to report that Massachusetts leads the Nation in veterans' benefits and services. Highlights of Massachusetts benefits include: a veteran service officer in every city and town; providing over \$70 million dollars in direct financial benefits to veterans and their dependents; launching the first-in-the-nation web portal for veterans benefits MassVetsAdvisor.org; collaborating with the Massachusetts Division of Career Services to maximize employment opportunities for every veteran; and offering unique peer support services in the areas of veteran suicide prevention, crisis intervention and support to find homes.

Our greatest asset is the emphasis we have placed on collaboration between Federal, state, municipal and private providers to ensure we are creating meaningful partnerships to maximize resources and provide the finest benefits and services the country has to offer.

In Massachusetts, we have found that there is not a lack of resources for our veterans and their families. The major impediment to accessing benefits is the lack of knowledge of those benefits and resources and the navigation of the various bureaucracies associated with those benefits.

To that end, Massachusetts has instituted a number of programs over the past few years to increase access, knowledge, and navigation of resources and benefits that we feel can serve as national models.

These programs include:

*Statewide Advocacy for Veterans Empowerment (SAVE) Team*

- SAVE is a collaboration with the Massachusetts Department of Public Health and their suicide prevention division.
- The SAVE Team is comprised of veterans or family members of veterans who have lived through similar transitions and can use their experiences to build a rapport with veterans and/or veteran family member.
- SAVE Team members offers peer-to-peer crisis intervention coupled with resource navigation to advocate for veterans who are not able to obtain the benefits they have earned due to institutional or personal barriers.
- In FY 2012, SAVE highlights include:



- Direct outreach provided to over 1400 veterans;
- 234 veterans received direct referral and linkage services;
- 94 veterans received active case management with 10 of those involving “critical incidences;”
- Partnership with the Massachusetts National Guard and provided critical support services during the Army-wide suicide prevention stand down last fall;
- As SAVE achieved its 5th Anniversary on February 11, 2013. DVS has experienced increased requests for support and awareness education to include educators, clinical staff, first responders, and correctional officers.
- Most recently, we have received requests from hiring managers and employers who are eager to know more about military culture as a means to improve their processes to hire veterans and support them when they return from deployment.

*Statewide Housing Advocacy for Reintegration and Prevention (SHARP) Team*

- Based on the success of the SAVE peer model, SHARP is a collaboration between DVS and the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) in the effort to end homelessness among veterans.
- This is accomplished through peer support, mental health services, psychiatric evaluation and linkages to emergency shelter at a Veteran-centric facility and permanent supportive housing through enrollment in the HUD-VASH program.
- SHARP was created as a pilot program in December 2010 with initial Federal funding of \$323,000. The initial staff of 4 peer specialists, a substance abuse counselor, psychiatrist and VA case management were able to provide safe and stable housing for 50 veterans in the Greater Boston area.
- Based on the success of the pilot program, the VA increased DVS funding by an additional \$1.4M in October 2012 to allow for the expansion of the SHARP model by adding 9 new peer support specialists and 12 new case managers positions contracted to local veteran centric providers.
- This collaboration with the VA and veteran service providers will allow DVS to substantially increase our outreach and access to veterans while putting Massachusetts on the path to be the first state in the country to end veterans’ homelessness.

*Women Veterans Network (WVN)*

- The Women Veterans Network continues to increase outreach and direct services to the over 27,000 women veterans in the Commonwealth.
- As women are the fastest growing segment of the veterans’ population, outreach and access to benefits is even more critical.
- The WVN provides a semiannual newsletter, an annual conference, several networking events, and an annual Women Veterans Appreciation Day.
- More recently, the WVN offers peer support and has provided direct case work and referral services to over 500 women veterans last year alone.

*MassVetsAdvisor.org*

- Massachusetts received \$1 million in Federal funding supported through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) to promote broadband adoption and usage for veterans.
- The Massachusetts Broadband Institute, a division of the Massachusetts Technology Collaborative partnered with the Massachusetts Department of Veterans’ Services and the Red Sox Foundation and Massachusetts General Hospital Home Base Program, to develop the Web site as an easy-to-use resource for Veterans and their family members.
- This one-stop resource streamlines comprehensive data of over 400 benefits and resources from state and Federal resources and lists only the benefits and services each veteran is qualified for.
- MassVetsAdvisor has allowed DVS to reach veterans of all generations and seamlessly connect them to their local resources, thereby significantly enhancing their access to and knowledge of benefits.

State departments of veterans’ services operate at the community level, in conjunction with numerous other state human service agencies and private providers. This model allows us to be in tune with local resources and programs that can provide critical resources to ensure no veteran or family member is denied access or service.

Traditional care through the VA is based on the individual veteran. Every veteran receives different care based on his or her eligibility and the veteran may not qualify for certain programs and benefits at the VA level. The states are free to operate outside the traditional parameters of VA programs. This flexibility allows the states to maximize non-VA resources and provide the critical connections to unique com-

munity resources to ensure veterans and their families have the access and knowledge they so deserve.

In closing, I want to again thank the Committee for the opportunity to testify today. Additionally, I encourage this Committee to examine unique state programs and best practices, like the Massachusetts SAVE & SHARP initiatives, for potential expansion and pilot programs through the Department of Veterans Affairs so other states can benefit and we can provide the finest resources for our veterans and their family members.

Thank you.

Chairman SANDERS. Mr. Nee, thank you very much for your work and for your testimony.

Mr. NEE. Thank you.

Chairman SANDERS. Our next panelist comes from the Military Initiatives for Points of Light. They do outstanding work.

Mike Monroe, thank you very much for being with us.

**STATEMENT OF MIKE MONROE, VICE PRESIDENT OF  
MILITARY INITIATIVES, POINT OF LIGHT**

Mr. MONROE. Thank you, Chairman Sanders.

Chairman Sanders, Ranking Member Burr, on behalf of Michelle Nunn, our CEO, and Neil Bush, our Chair, and thousands of volunteers, I would like to thank you for giving Points of Light the opportunity to talk about the Community Blueprint Initiative.

My name is Mike Monroe and I serve as the Vice President of Military Initiatives at Points of Light. I came to this role in June of last year after serving as a Marine officer, infantry officer for 12 years, and as a civilian employee of several government agencies.

Let me start with a simple statement. The Community Blueprint is a set of tools and resources that individuals and community organizations can use to help veteran, servicemembers, and their families succeed.

The Blueprint got its start at the 2010 White Oak Summit where representatives from more than 55 non-profit, corporate, and government organizations gathered to discuss the thousands of non-profits engaged in efforts to help returning veterans and the problems caused by a real lack of coordination of their efforts.

Some of those in attendance included the Military Officers Association of America, Blue Star Families, the USO, the National Military Family Association, and The American Legion Auxiliary.

Those at the summit were determined to create a way for community organizations to work together to offer better, more comprehensive, and more accessible services to the hundreds of thousands of veterans returning home. Members of this original group stepped forward and created the Community Blueprint Advisory Council.

This council, still intact today, created a suite of best practices to help returning veterans in eight critical areas—employment, housing, education, reintegration, behavioral health, volunteerism, family strength, and financial and legal matters.

Four things that make the Community Blueprint uniquely useful, powerful, and sustainable are. It is a public-private partnership. It can be customized to a community's needs and scaled to fit a community's size. It is completely volunteer powered, and it engages veterans as part of the solution.

The Community Blueprint was officially launched in October 2012 with the generous support from lead sponsor, ITT Exelis along with the UPS Foundation and the Corporation for National Community Service. The Community Blueprint is a strong public-private partnership bringing on-the-ground organizations and people together, driven by local needs and using proven tools and resources to make the transition to civilian life easier for tens of thousands of returning veterans and their families.

Exelis has also formed the Exelis Action Corps to engage its own employees, 10 percent of whom are veterans, as volunteers working to help meet veterans' needs.

At Points of Light, we think the best way for government, the private sector, and the non-profit sector to help the over one million projected transitioning veterans reintegrate back into society is by defining what works and implementing proven strategies in a cooperative, coordinated way at the community level.

We know that no one organization can provide a lifetime of continued support. Points of Light and its partners are working alongside government agencies to help fill the gaps and connect veterans to critical services.

Veterans like David Scott, a third generation Navy veteran who served in Desert Storm and Operation Deny Flight. David is a disabled veteran. On his own, David could not get the health care he needed. Thanks to an intervention by the local Red Cross, a part of the Blueprint Community in Atlanta, David finally got an appointment with the VA Clinic in Oakwood, Georgia, to get help with his long-term care needs.

The Community Blueprint engages veterans as part of the solution. With backing from AmeriCorps, the Blueprint has created a Veteran Leader Corps, consisting of 75 members, half of whom are veterans, serving in 19 Blueprint Communities. These 75 men and women add to our "boots on the ground" as AmeriCorps members who are in the field providing direct service to veterans every day. Veteran Leader Corps members use Blueprint tools and resources to help veterans and military families in all areas of need but most specifically in job readiness and volunteerism.

Veteran Leader Corps members like Retired Chief Petty Officer Robert Rotkosky, a former U.S. Navy SEAL, who dedicated his career to protecting our way of life. After 20 years of faithful service to our country and a second career as a contractor helping the military, "Ski" as he is known to us had more to give. He chose to support his fellow sailors, marines, soldiers, airmen, and guardians by enlisting in the Veterans Leader Corp in Huntsville, AL. "Ski" now works with "Still Serving Veterans" Huntsville, where he and his colleagues have used Blueprint tools and resources to help 41 veterans find jobs and 100 veterans get proper benefits in just 3 months.

Since the launch 6 months ago, the Blueprint program has expanded from 20 to 44 communities. Blueprint communities now dot the country from Fayetteville, NC, to Lakewood, WA; from Denver, CO, to Fairborn, OH.

The Blueprint tools and resources can be useful to hundreds, even thousands of other communities.

I want to thank you again, Mr. Chairman, and all the Members of the Committee for your service and support of veterans and their families.

We look forward to continuing to work with you to provide those who served our country with what they have earned, a prosperous and healthy future aided, as needed, by a network of compassionate support.

Thank you.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Monroe follows:]

PREPARED STATEMENT OF MIKE MONROE, VICE PRESIDENT, MILITARY INITIATIVES,  
POINTS OF LIGHT

Chairman Sanders, Ranking Member Burr, and Members of the Committee: My name is Mike Monroe, and I serve as the Vice President of Military Initiatives at Points of Light. I came to this role in June of last year, after serving the country as both a member of the Marine Corps and as a civilian employee of several government agencies.

On behalf of Michelle Nunn, our CEO and Neil Bush, our Board Chair, I would like to thank the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee for bringing attention to the essential role that community-based organizations play in addressing the challenges faced by the men and women who have served our country in the Armed Forces. Thank you also for giving Points of Light the opportunity to present the Community Blueprint Initiative to the Committee.

As the Committee is well aware, more than 2.4 million men and women have served in current conflicts. Over the next four years, 1 million service men and women will transition out of the military and back into their communities. Many will face significant challenges returning to civilian life. And many will face tremendous obstacles, including unemployment, behavioral health issues, and homelessness.

There are some 40,000 nonprofits working to help, but too often these efforts are isolated and have low impact. No single organization or agency can provide a lifetime of care and support, but people across the country are asking for guidance on how to help veterans, servicemembers and their families in a coordinated, comprehensive, and community-wide way.

This challenge led to the launch of the Community Blueprint. The initial idea came out of a retreat in 2010 where over 55 nonprofit, government, and for-profit entities concluded this problem had to be resolved. From this initial group of 55, a group of 16 leaders stepped forward to help build this new effort, which they called the "Community Blueprint."

Under the leadership of these 16 (known at the 'Blueprint Advisory Council') and with the help of some American Legion Auxiliary VISTA's, the Blueprint was created. The group set out to create tools and resources that would help communities assist veterans, military members and their families at the local level. Once the content was created, the Advisory Council (now at 18 members) wanted the Blueprint to be housed and administered by an organization that had expertise and experience at the community level. After an extensive search, they found a home for it at Points of Light, an international nonprofit founded by President George H. W. Bush and the largest organization in the world dedicated to volunteer service.

This Council, still intact today, created a suite of best practices to help returning veterans in eight critical areas:

EMPLOYMENT

To help veterans find meaningful employment, the Council created the following seven community solutions related to employment:

- Job Fairs—hosting job fairs focused on veterans, reservists, national guardsmen, and their spouses.
- Resume Preparation Workshops—staging resume workshops for veterans and military spouses.
- Mock Interview Workshops—holding mock interview workshops for veterans and military spouses.
- Training: planning *Reverse Boot Camps* designed to introduce veterans and servicemembers to the types of jobs available in their community, including managing their expectations regarding office culture, advancing their careers and aiding in the translation of military experience to civilian terms.

- Inducements for Military-Friendly Employer Practices—educating employers about the unique professional challenges and skills of this population.
- Annual Media Campaign—raising awareness of the benefits of hiring a veteran.
- Community Action Team—forming a Community Action Team focused on employment.

#### VOLUNTEERISM

The following are community solutions for leveraging volunteerism to meet the needs of servicemembers, veterans and their families.

- Effective Volunteer Engagement—providing training for volunteers to serve with and for the military community.
- Implementing a Service Fair—holding a service fair to share the many ways in which volunteers can serve in the area of veterans services.
- Volunteerism Community Action Team—learning how to form a Volunteerism Community Action Team.

#### FAMILY STRENGTH

The following are community solutions for addressing the challenges of veterans and their families:

- Social Service Outreach—publicizing the formal military outreach efforts by local nonprofits.
- Child Care—providing child care for families during deployment and recovery from wounds.
- Respite for Caregivers and Care Recipients—providing respite care for those who are responsible for the needs of loved one.
- Annual Media Campaign—thanking families for their service and highlighting local and government services.
- Community Action Team—learning how to form a Family Strength Community Action Team.

#### BEHAVIORAL HEALTH

Behavioral health struggles, such as post-traumatic stress (PTS), Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), major depressive disorder (MDD) or Traumatic Brain Injuries (TBI), can lead to malaise, unemployment, problematic family relations and—in an increasing number of cases—suicide.

To serve our servicemembers and veterans in a manner commensurate with their needs, we must understand and provide for the unique stressors they face on a day-to-day basis.

The following are community solutions for addressing the behavioral health challenges of veterans and their families.

- Annual Anti-Stigma Campaign—encouraging veterans and their families to defy stigmas and seek help.
- Provider Training—training local health providers on special issues such as PTSD/TBI and other veteran issues and resources.
- First Responder Training—training police, fire rescue, school personnel and ERs about issues and resources that affect members of the military community.
- Ease of Access to Care—making it easier for veterans, servicemembers and their families to access mental health care.
- Community Action Team—learning how to form a Behavioral Health Community Action Team.

#### FINANCIAL AND LEGAL

Financial and legal challenges can be a distraction from the mission of current servicemembers and an additional burden to veterans and military families struggling to re-integrate into civilian society. Often when these challenges emerge, many veterans may hesitate to reach out for help, given their training in self-reliance.

The following are community solutions for addressing the financial and legal challenges of veterans and their families:

- Financial and Legal Training—educating the community about common financial/legal issues and available resources.
- Veterans Court—publicizing steps to utilize special court systems that are sensitive to military issues.
- Community Action Team—learning how to form a financial and legal Community Action Team.

## EDUCATION

Education changes lives in unimaginable ways, and in the modern world nothing is so great a predictor of a person's future employment, salary or standard of living. America's military veterans and children face unique challenges in education. We owe it to them to help them overcome these hurdles and attain the education they need to be successful.

The following are community solutions for addressing challenges related to education and the military community:

*K-12 Education*

- School Transfers—adopting systems to ensure easy acceptance of transcripts and credits of a relocating military child.
- School Training—training schools to identify military children and inform schools on the pertinent issues and available resources.
- Community Resources—implementing programs that welcome and support military children.
- Annual Media Campaign—celebrating the contributions and sacrifices of the military child.
- Guide to Impact Aid—learning about Impact Aid, a Department of Education program that compensates schools with significant military child attendance.
- Community Action Team—learning how to form a K-12 Education Community Action Team.

*Higher Education*

- Career Counselor Training—training counselors about special military issues and resources.
- Mentoring—offering mentors to student veterans, servicemembers and their families.
- Scholarships—offering special financial programs for student veterans, servicemembers and their families.
- Campus Welcome and Reintegration—developing and implementing strategies to identify and support military-connected students and families.

## HOUSING

Homelessness in a developed nation is inexcusable, but homelessness among the military community is even more shameful. Veterans have sacrificed for their country, often risking their lives to protect American freedoms.

In the United States, 200,000 veterans will be homeless at some point over the course of a year, with approximately 107,000 veterans homeless each night. Nearly one fifth of the homeless population is veterans, though only 8 percent of the general population can claim veteran status. The following are community solutions for addressing housing stability and homelessness among veterans:

- Homelessness Training—providing shelters, veteran service organizations, nonprofits, and community members with the knowledge required to effectively combat veteran homelessness.
- Supportive Housing Awareness—raising awareness of veteran homelessness and the availability of supportive housing opportunities; raising awareness among housing developers and funders of the importance of supportive housing as a solution to homelessness.

## REINTEGRATION

Servicemembers, whether returning from deployment or permanently separating from the military, come home to a time of celebration with family and friends. However, when the excitement wears off, the reality and challenges of reintegration begin.

The following are community solutions for addressing the reintegration challenges of veterans and their families:

- Welcome Program—providing outreach to veterans, servicemembers and their families entering into the community.
- Mentoring Program—establishing a mentoring program for veterans moving into the community.
- Annual Media Campaign—thanking local veterans for their service and highlighting resources.
- Coordination with Yellow Ribbon Program—expanding this DOD Program for supporting reserve and national guard families into outreach to veterans.

- Community Action Team—learning how to form a Reintegration Community Action Team.

This set of tools and practices provides a framework for communities to produce positive, measurable outcomes for veterans, military members and their families. Our goal is to have hundreds of communities (200 by 2014) touching veterans, military and their families through the Blueprint framework.

To do this we are putting some “boots on the ground.” Points of Light’s Veteran Leader Corps is a new AmeriCorps program. The program has 75 members (half of whom are veterans) spread out around 15 to 20 communities, focusing on employment and volunteerism.

Veterans Leader Corps (VLC) members work out of host sites within communities. These host sites are local nonprofits focusing on veterans’ issues. The first group of VLC members launched in Oct 2012 (30 members in 11 communities). The remaining VLC members (45 in eight additional communities) launched at the end of March 2013. There are now 44 Blueprint Communities.

The building and expansion of the Blueprint is made possible by a grant from the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS) as well as funding from ITT Exelis and UPS. Exelis has created the Exelis Action Corps (EAC) to offer their employees opportunities to lead and participate in volunteer service projects that focus on veterans, military members and their families. We are working to ensure that the EAC is integrated with local Blueprint Communities as well as VLC efforts.

At Points of Light, we think the best way for government, the private sector and the nonprofit sector to help the over 1 million transitioning veterans reintegrate into society is to define what works and implement these proven strategies through local cooperation and coordination. We know that no one organization can provide a lifetime of continued support. Points of Light and its partners are working, alongside government agencies, to help fill the gaps and connect veterans to critical services.

Veterans like David Scott, a third-generation Navy veteran who served—and was disabled—in Desert Storm and Operation Deny Flight. On his own, David couldn’t get the health care he needed. Thanks to an intervention by the local Red Cross—a part of the Blueprint Community in Atlanta—David finally got an appointment with the VA Clinic in Oakwood, GA, to get help with his long-term care needs.

We also think many veterans want to continue to serve here at home. Retired Chief Petty Officer Robert Rotkosky, a former Navy SEAL, dedicated his career to protecting our way of life. After 20 years of faithful service to our country and a second career as a contractor helping the military, “Ski” (as he is known) had more to give. He chose to support his fellow sailors, marines, soldiers, airmen, and guardians by enlisting in the Veterans Leader Corp in Huntsville, Alabama. “Ski” now works with “Still Serving Veterans” Huntsville, AL, where he and his colleagues have helped 41 veterans find jobs and 100 veterans get proper benefits in just 3 months.

At Points of Light, we value the commitment that service men and women have given to our country. We believe that helping returning veterans successfully reenter society is not only the right thing to do but the smart thing to do. These veterans have much yet to give and they are hungry for the opportunity to provide for their families and to be of continued service to their communities.

Chairman SANDERS. Mr. Monroe, thank you for your testimony and for the wonderful work your organization is doing.

We are now going to hear from Eric Weingartner. Mr. Weingartner is the Managing Director of Survival and Veterans at the Robin Hood Foundation.

Mr. Weingartner, thanks very much for being with us.

**STATEMENT OF ERIC WEINGARTNER, MANAGING DIRECTOR,  
SURVIVAL AND VETERANS, ROBIN HOOD FOUNDATION**

Mr. WEINGARTNER. Thank you, Senator. Good morning, Chairman Sanders, Senators, and the Committee staff.

On behalf of the Board of Directors and staff of Robin Hood, thank you for including us in this important discussion on community partnerships with the Veterans Administration.

My name is Eric Weingartner and I manage those portfolios, Senator, that you mentioned at Robin Hood in New York City.

Despite some progress on the part of the Veterans Administration, our work in New York City leaves us to conclude that the VA operates in relative isolation; disconnected from public and private resources that are fundamental to the livelihood and health our Nation's veterans.

My intent today is to share with you our experience working in the veterans space with a suggestion or two for how to move forward.

For context, Robin Hood's mission is simple—fight poverty in New York City. Since 1988, Robin Hood has focused on finding, funding, and creating programs in schools that generate meaningful results for families in New York's poorest neighborhoods.

Over our 25-year history, Robin Hood has distributed more than \$1.25 billion to hundreds of New York City-based not-for-profit organizations.

Robin Hood's programs have always served veterans. However, in the beginning in 2009, we noticed an up tick in the number of veterans showing up at our food pantries, our homeless shelters, and our job training programs.

In response, we committed to tackling the issue more deliberately, and in partnership with the then-Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Mike Mullen, we raised a \$13-million fund to incubate new programs to support veterans and their families.

So, in the summer of 2011, we began to invest locally and were struck by a few underlying challenges.

First, when veterans leave the military, they are discharged abruptly and without a support system to make a transition to civilian life.

Second, demographic data on veterans is incomplete and not centrally managed, making it difficult to reach out to those veterans who could benefit from support services.

Third, the VA and its programs are not properly integrated with local communities; and last, Veterans Service Organizations, while very well meaning and in some cases effective, are not at a scale or quality to meet the demand.

In the face of these challenges, today we have invested \$7.5 million in over 25 brand new programs. Our programs have placed over 700 vets in jobs, moved 250 street homeless veterans into shelter and connected 1250 veterans to legal services in partnership with our local VA.

All of our new models aim to do two fundamental things: one, get help to those veterans and their families that need it most; and two, to serve as a testing ground for models that can be replicated nationally.

A few underlying principles have guided our investment. Lessons that we believe have national relevance.

First, we relied on New York City, the city of New York and the city's major funder of human services to be our partner. The majority of our investment has been made in partnership with our local government, augmenting existing city programs. We believe that this coordination is the primary condition for success.

Second, instead of relying on Veteran Services Organizations to expand their reach, we instead choose to create new models with New York City's most established not-for-profit service providers



such as New York University's medical school, Single Stop, Common Ground, and the Jericho Project.

Third, we formed an advisory board to ensure that the private sector both participated in our planning and was engaged in shaping new models of programming. Admiral Mullen and Robin Hood member, Steve Cohen, lead that board.

What is ahead of us? I think some daunting challenges relating to reintegration must be addressed fundamentally. Government does not transition soldiers from military life to civilian life and the VA fails to create a safety net for soldiers after discharge.

The Department of Defense and the VA need to manage a harm handoff. This coordination would connect soldiers to jobs or college in advance of discharge and would include a commitment to facilitate benefits, housing, and health care very efficiently and right away.

While we are hopeful that the DOD's redesigned TAP program will improve the transition, we are fairly skeptical that the plans go far enough to ensure an effective safety net.

Today I ask the Committee to help our veterans by committing to a new model of service and accountability. The VA must hold itself accountable to plan that can demonstrate integration and partnership with local communities. One that is measured by the Senate.

The city of New York funds and manages an impressive roster of not-for-profits that are both publicly and privately funded. Unfortunately, we believe that the VA is structurally isolated from the system of services and should count on and utilize these resources in a more deliberate and systemic way.

To this end, this spring Robin Hood, the city of New York, the business community, and the not-for-profit sector will pilot a first of its kind veterans' collaborative in New York City; and we ask the VA to join our effort to develop the connective tissue between the VA and the broader New York City community.

Our team has been formed over the last 18 months and stands ready to formally collaborate with the VA to revamp our shared goal of ensuring financial, physical, and emotional health for our veterans.

I ask the VA to commit today to this New York City pilot to create a first of its kind national model for helping our veterans get all the way home.

Thank you very much for your time.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Weingartner follows:]

PREPARED STATEMENT OF ERIC WEINGARTNER, MANAGING DIRECTOR, SURVIVAL AND VETERANS, ROBIN HOOD FOUNDATION

On behalf of the Board of Directors and staff of Robin Hood, thank you for including us in this important discussion on community partnerships with the Veterans Administration, "Call to Action: VA Outreach and Community Partnerships."

THE ROBIN HOOD FOUNDATION

For context, Robin Hood's mission is simple—fight poverty in New York City. Since 1988, Robin Hood has focused on finding, funding, and creating programs and schools that generate meaningful results for families in New York's poorest neighborhoods. Over our 25-year history, Robin Hood has distributed more than \$1.25 billion to hundreds of New York City-based not for profit organizations.

## ROBIN HOOD VETERANS INITIATIVE

Since our founding, Robin Hood's grantees have served veterans. But beginning in 2009, we noticed an uptick in the number of veterans relying on our food, job training, and housing programs. In response, we committed to tackling the issue more deliberately. In the spring of 2011, in partnership with the then-Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Mike Mullen, we raised a \$13-million fund to incubate new programs to support veterans and their families.

In advance of our investment, Robin Hood staff worked to understand the veterans landscape in New York City and were alarmed by the conditions that we saw for both veterans and the organizations in place to serve them and their families.

A few underlying challenges were most glaring:

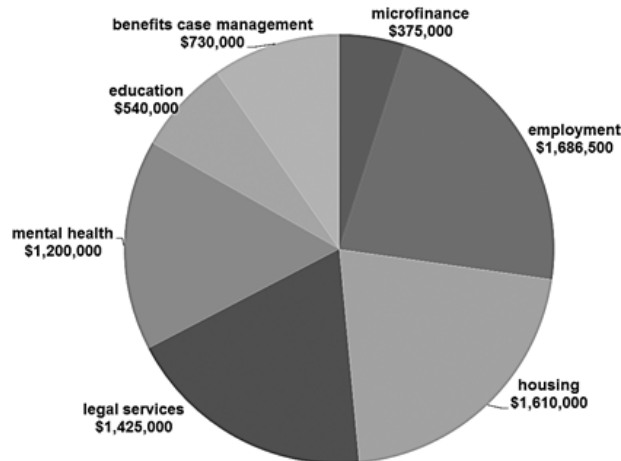
1. When veterans leave the military, they are discharged abruptly and without a support system to make a transition to civilian life.
2. Demographic data on veterans is incomplete and not centrally managed, making recruitment a major challenge.
3. The VA and its programs are not integrated with local communities.
4. And last, Veterans Service Organizations are not at a scale or quality to meet the demand.

We also recognized that there was an absence of leadership in the veterans space both nationally and locally, a leadership presence that was needed to engage a set of disparate partners to serve veterans more deliberately. Robin Hood has worked to fill some of that gap locally, both through grant making and through an informal network of government and private partners focused on the shared commitment to serve those who have served.

A few underlying principles have guided Robin Hood's investment in the veterans space, lessons that we believe have national relevance. First, we relied on the city of New York, the City's major funder of human services, to be our partner. The majority of our investment has been made in partnership with our local government, augmenting existing City programs. We believe that this coordination is a condition for success. Second, instead of relying on veterans' service organizations to expand their reach, we instead chose to create new models with New York City's most established not for profit service providers. Third, we formed an advisory board to ensure that the private sector both participated in our planning and was engaged in shaping new models of programming. Admiral Mullen and businessman Steve Cohen lead our advisory board.

To date, Robin Hood has made 25 grants totaling over \$7.5 million. The grants have served over 6,500 veterans and their families. In the coming year, we plan to spend an additional \$4.5 million, in effect spending the remainder of the fund. And while the special fund will exist no longer, its impact will continue. The grants we have made leave behind an institutional infrastructure for helping veterans, and the most successful of the veterans grants will carry on as core Robin Hood investments.

Below is the breakdown of our vets funding to date:



## PROGRAM HIGHLIGHTS

*Case Management / Benefit Connection:*

It is well acknowledged that veterans and their families often struggle to find appropriate resources to thrive following their service. In fact, only about half of all veterans access benefits for which they are eligible.

This is not uncommon among poor New Yorkers generally. In response, Robin Hood created a program called Single Stop. Single Stop is a network of over 80 community-based sites citywide that serve 125,000 poor New Yorkers annually by screening and enrolling them in public benefits.

Our first step in our Veterans Initiative was to tap into this existing infrastructure to help needy veterans. First, in July 2013, we forged an innovative, cost-effective peer-based service model (veteran to veteran) to help 1,800 veterans and their families access public benefits, veterans' benefits, jobs, housing, mental health, education, and other social services. To date (April 2013), we have served over 500 needy veterans. Second, in October 2012, we expanded the Single Stop pilot to help 175 veterans tap veterans' benefits utilizing "accredited benefits counselors" at six sites across the city managed by the Bloomberg Administration. Finally, in April 2013, in partnership with the VA, we forged a pilot initiative with three VA Medical Centers in Brooklyn, Manhattan, and the Bronx to provide Single Stop services (access to public benefits, jobs, housing and other social services) to 1,750 veterans identified as homeless or at risk of becoming homeless. And we do so to help the VA in its quest to eliminate veterans' homelessness by 2015.

*Veterans' Legal Services:*

Poor veterans, like other poor New Yorkers, often need legal services. In fact, given the unique burden placed on servicemembers and their families, and the prevalence of mental health and substance abuse issues, the needs may be even greater, and more varied, than the typical poor household. Thus, in October 2011, Robin Hood partnered with three trusted legal providers to provide free legal services to 800 low-income veterans citywide. Since then, we have added a fourth legal partner. To date (April 2013), the four legal providers have helped over 1,200 needy veterans with free legal services.

*Mental Health:*

One in five veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan reports a service-related disability or suffers from post-traumatic stress or major depression.

In the decade between 2002 and 2012, 2.4 million servicemembers have left active duty and have become eligible for VA health care with roughly 900,000 registering with the VA. Assessments of the electronic medical records for those who were evaluated by the VA show that approximately 22 percent of veterans evaluated were diagnosed with depression, and the prevalence of PTSD among these veterans was reported at 29 percent. Furthermore, the suicide rate for veterans is staggering; 18 veterans die daily by their own hands.

Yet, a primary reason that returning veterans fail to seek treatment is perceived stigma. Many individuals fear that seeking mental-health services will jeopardize their career, community standing or both. Others are reluctant to expose their vulnerabilities to providers who may also be Armed Forces personnel themselves, given the military's emphasis on strength, confidence and bravery. And some veterans have found the settings or providers they used especially bureaucratic or unsatisfactory in other ways, and would pursue a different option if available.

To date, we have invested \$1.2 million across 3 grantees providing mental health services to veterans. We have enabled the Langone Medical Center at New York University School of Medicine's Military Veteran Clinic to provide family-focused, comprehensive outreach, screening, treatment and follow-up for mental health disorders for low income veterans and their families. In year one alone, over 300 families will be served through an intensive out-patient model. In addition, we have partnered with Vets Prevail to provide free, online cognitive behavior counseling, e-learning and peer-to-peer support for returning veterans outside the VA—the idea being to provide an easily accessible, stigma-free option to veterans otherwise falling through the cracks. Our partnership with Give an Hour, a member-based organization of therapists, has provided more than 70,000 hours of free therapy to veterans and their families facing bouts of depression and PTSD. The therapeutic service is now being copied across the country.

Moving forward, we will push to further expand the presence of veteran and veteran family programming at the private medical institutions in New York City.

*Jobs:*

There are 240,000 veterans living in New York city of whom 7 percent are unemployed.<sup>1</sup> The unemployment rate for veterans who served in the military since September 2001 (Gulf War-era II veterans) is 12 percent. It is more than twice that rate for young veterans (those ages 18 to 24) who served during Gulf War era II at roughly 29.1 percent for 2011.<sup>2</sup> The grants we've made focus on job training and placement and will help veterans build upon their existing skills to find work in growing sectors where employers are hiring. Our largest partnership to date is with the city of New York's Workforce One (WF1) system, where we've provided \$600,000 to increase the number of veterans and their spouses that are placed in jobs to almost 1,500 annually. Through a new grant to Helmets to Hardhats, we project that 200 veterans will be placed in union apprenticeships, primarily in the trades, in the coming year.

In total, we have invested just shy of \$2 million in over eight organizations related to employment and training.

*Veterans Housing:*

In November 2009, President Obama and Secretary of Veterans Affairs, Eric Shinseki, announced a commitment by the Federal Government to end homelessness amongst our veterans in five years—by 2015. Vets make up approximately 6 percent of the New York State population, but are at least 10 percent of New York City's street homeless population.

To date, Robin Hood has invested \$1.6 million toward housing and homeless services for our city's veterans. A grant of \$785,000 has been allocated to three direct service providers (Bowery Residents' Committee, Goddard Riverside and Common Ground Community) in partnership with the city's Department of Homeless Services and the local VA. Thus far, we have been able to bring 240 veterans out of the cold and put them on a path to permanent housing. We estimate that only 50 chronically street homeless veterans remain on our city's streets today, down from 300 veterans just 18 ago. This successful veterans outreach grant was the first of its kind nationally.

In addition to tackling street homelessness, Robin Hood made a grant in April 2012 of \$200,000 to Homeward Bound, Jericho Project's new program for moving low-income veterans into affordable, independent housing. With this grant, Jericho will help 60 homeless and unemployed vets connect to employment, financial counseling and entitlements, and ultimately secure permanent, affordable housing.

Since July 2009, we have supported the Doe Fund, Inc.'s Porter Avenue veterans' shelter and employment program to connect homeless veterans with employment and permanent housing. Last year alone, 240 veterans received temporary housing, with almost 70 of them securing permanent jobs and over 120 to permanent housing. Last year's grant was \$100,000 toward case management staff. Since 2009, Robin Hood has granted Doe Fund \$775,000 toward its veterans work (\$475,000 of which was granted prior to the establishment of our Veterans Fund).

Beyond our grant making, Robin Hood convened the HUD-VASH Boot Camp in August 2011 (ongoing) to support regulatory reform to expedite HUD-VASH supportive housing process to house more homeless veterans by collaborating with city agencies, the VA, non-profits and the Interagency Council on Homelessness. So far these efforts have reduced by half the time for veterans to move into housing (to 123–181 days from 240–360 days).

*Education:*

Education is a true path out of poverty, and we have invested \$615,000 in two organizations to help keep vets on that path. The number of veterans enrolled at City University of New York's (CUNY) six community colleges has increased remarkably. In spring 2008, 299 student veterans were enrolled at the six community colleges. The figure increased to 998 student veterans by spring 2010. However, only one in five veterans graduates from CUNY's community colleges within six years.

Our grant to Project for Return and Opportunity in Veterans' Education (PROVE) is supporting veterans who are newly-enrolled college students, assisting them as they transition from military service to student life within the CUNY community college system. We have also made a grant to Iraq/Afghanistan Veterans of America, in partnership with the Mayor's Office of Adult Education, to help 150 OEF/OIF veterans avoid predatory for-profit colleges.

<sup>1</sup> U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs

<sup>2</sup> U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics

## ALIGNING THE VA WITH COMMUNITIES

The Robin Hood investment in the veterans' space is one example of community resources available to veterans and their families. These programs, along with a much larger cohort of City, State, Federal and other privately funded programs, make up an impressive mosaic of supports that are accessible and appropriate to augment VA services. And despite some progress on the part of the Veterans Administration, our work in New York City leaves us to conclude that the VA operates in relative isolation; disconnected from public and private resources that are fundamental to the livelihood and health our Nation's veterans. Robin Hood asks the U.S. Senate and Veterans Administration to consider a deliberate shift as it pertains to community partnership and local resources.

Fundamentally, government does not transition soldiers from military life to civilian life, and the VA fails to create a safety net for soldiers after discharge. The Department of Defense and the VA need to better support this transition. This would include a process to connect soldiers to jobs or college in advance of discharge and a commitment to facilitate timely benefits, housing and health care for our veterans that need help the most. And while we are hopeful that the DOD's redesigned Transition Assistance Program will improve the transition, we are also skeptical that the plans go far enough to ensure an effective safety net.

Presuming that a full shift in the discharge process is unrealized in the near term, and considering the 2.4 million veterans already living a civilian life, the VA needs to develop a community "blueprint" by which VA medical and social service staff can access local resources in a more deliberate and strategic way. As outlined above, the large majority of resources developed under Robin Hood's watch are not core deliverables managed by the VA, instead, we've focused on employment, education, housing placement, case management, benefit enrollment, and legal services. These programs, save the connection to VA benefits that are in some cases funded by VA subcontractors, fall outside of the scope of VA staff though are critical elements associated with veterans' transition and ongoing life outside of the military. These resources are largely funded by City and State government and are eligible to veterans and under utilized by veterans and their families. In each community, the VA needs to structure a process by which VA staff can smartly ensure that veterans access and enroll in these important programs that will complement the health care services made available by the VA. It is unrealistic to believe that a "community plan" will look the same in every community, though the VA should develop a set of criteria that establish these important connections, and local VA leadership should be evaluated on the effectiveness of these local partnerships with municipal government and private resources.

To this end, this spring, Robin Hood, the city of New York, the business community, and the not-for-profit sector will pilot a first of its kind veterans collaborative in New York City, and we ask the VA to join our effort to develop the connective tissue between the VA and the broader NYC community. Our team has been formed over the last 18 months and stands ready to formally collaborate with the VA to revamp our shared goal of ensuring financial and physical health for our veterans. I ask that the VA commit today to our New York City pilot to create a first of its kind model for reintegration.

On behalf of the entire Robin Hood community, thank you for your time and interest.

Chairman SANDERS. Thank you very much, Mr. Weingartner.

Let me start off with kind of a simple, basic question. I think we all recognize that to do right by our veterans there has to be intensive cooperation by the VA and other Federal agencies, the non-profits, State and local governments.

Ms. Spencer, has the VA done a good job in trying to coordinate those efforts? How is the relationship between the VA and those other entities?

Ms. SPENCER. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for that question. We are currently having some very serious conversations with the VA about expanding the VetCorps model I mentioned to you in the State of Washington that is having such success in making sure that those who are enrolled in college today on the GI Bill graduate.

We need them to be successful. This is a fabulous tool—the Post-9/11 GI Bill—and we need these veterans who decide to take advantage of this benefit to succeed.

I serve on the Interagency Council on Homelessness which Secretary Shinseki currently chairs. I heard him recently talk passionately about this benefit of the Post-9/11 GI Bill and how he wants to see a higher rate of graduation as well.

So, we are in very serious conversations with his team about how we can have an interagency agreement between the Corporation for National and Community Service and VA to scale and reach more veterans in college and have that peer-to-peer veteran.

So, the desire is certainly there. The passion is there. I think they are doing well. I want to do more with VBA, the Veteran's Benefit Administration.

Chairman SANDERS. OK. Let me just ask that same question to Mr. Nee. Are you getting the cooperation that you need from the VA? What suggestions do you have as to how that effort can be improved?

Mr. NEE. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. We work pretty cooperatively with VA, particularly at the national level. Secretary Shinseki has been very aggressive in terms of signing this MOU with the State directors and secretaries in order to continue that partnership.

I think it has a lot of room it can grow in. I think we can demonstrate in collaboration with VA that when we serve veterans and veteran benefits and provide those benefits we do not just need to look at VA as the end-all/be-all for all veterans to go into.

I mean, we certainly do not do that when it comes to public health. I mean, we all have individual public health, State departments, and city departments of public health. We do not just refer to, you know, the Health and Human Services Department of the Federal Government nor do we do that for the Department of Education.

We should not do that for veterans either. Veterans have benefits and services that exist at all levels of government and can access, as the panelists have said here, many benefits and services through non-profits and other organizations.

We take the approach in Massachusetts that when we serve veterans, we bring them the benefit buffet; and at the end of the buffet, we try to create a plate for them that makes sense for them.

That will include some VA; that will include some other entries as well. But at the end of the day, we need to do a better job collaborating that.

Chairman SANDERS. Good. Thank you. Mr. Monroe, the same question to you. Are you happy with the cooperation that you are getting from the VA at this point?

Mr. MONROE. Chairman Sanders, thank you for that question.

We launched in October, you know. I consider us still in startup mode, so my main focus is building the infrastructure, if you will, around what we have and growing the Blueprint Communities.

We do not have a requirement that a Blueprint Community has to be working with the local VA. As we sign them up, we walk them through a sign-up process and we ask them, are you working with the local VA? If you are, what are you doing? If not, why not?

I can tell you that, off the top of my head, of the 44 I think about 60 percent have a good relationship at the local level.

Once we are kind of up on plane a little bit more, I intend to try to reach out a little bit more to the VA and solidify that a little bit more. But right now, yes, everything at the local level seems to be working well.

Chairman SANDERS. Thank you.

Mr. Weingartner, the same question.

Mr. WEINGARTNER. I think I would be less optimistic than some of my colleagues on the panel. I think that fundamentally the VA in New York City leaves on the table a set of collaborations that are so critical for the vets that they are serving and is fairly isolated.

So, to push in whether or not it is the city of New York or—

Chairman SANDERS. Let me ask you. Let me pick up.

Mr. WEINGARTNER. Please.

Chairman SANDERS. You say they are fairly isolated. Are you suggesting that in New York City many veterans do not know about the benefits to which they are entitled?

Mr. WEINGARTNER. I think it is multifaceted. I think that is a condition. I think that vets that are being served by the VA probably need a broader swathe of services that are not provided by the VA, and then, in turn, when the VA has the attention of a vet that has a complex social service need, that they themselves are not uniquely positioned to fulfill that, and, in turn, do not know how to push back.

So, I think it is a double whammy, you know. You have isolation from a health care perspective, but then, secondarily, you have a mosaic of human services that are publicly and privately funded that have nothing to do with the VA that are, I think, isolated from that structure.

And, you know, I think that is a real massive loss of opportunity.

Chairman SANDERS. Thank you very much.

Senator Burr.

Senator BURR. Mr. Chairman, I think we are beginning to hear more and more that VA—from a standpoint of their delivery of services—maybe lacks the ability to reach out in a community-based way to figure out how much more they can bring to the table in providing the holistic approach.

I think Mr. Weingartner clearly points that out, but we have heard it as it related to mental health, specific illnesses; and it is something I hope we are going to dig into.

Wendy, I cannot let you be here without saying that I got your testimony at 11:06 p.m. last night. I take for granted that OMB had to sign off on your testimony. Is that correct?

Ms. SPENCER. Yes.

Senator BURR. What changes did they make to your testimony? Any?

Ms. SPENCER. None, Senator. I am not aware of any particular changes. We were in concert.

Senator BURR. OK. I hope you do not mind me asking. But you are held to the same standard that the VA is and we would expect that testimony to be here 48 hours in advance.

Ms. SPENCER. Thank you, sir.

Senator BURR. Mr. Weingartner, I am particularly struck with the honesty that you have communicated with us. How can you find veterans in New York and the VA cannot?

Mr. WEINGARTNER. It has been—let me give you a little bit more background in terms of the answer. Robin Hood this year will grant \$140 million to programs across a massive range of programming. The only set of programs where we will struggle around recruitment is with vets.

Literally, every program we fund has a waiting list except for veterans. It is a really, really complex struggle. There are a lot of different approaches. Each program has their own plan to find vets. Some of it is through the VA, some of it is through the city of New York, some of it is through individual recruitment.

And, part of it is that—for example, we augmented a city program with \$700,000 to find 1,250 vets jobs. Jobs sell. So, we are marketing vets to find jobs. So, each one of these programs is literally clawing to fill the spaces with vets that can take part in it.

Senator BURR. I am not taking a shot at the VA. But all of you have something unique. You are finding people that they are not finding. You are providing services to people that currently are not being supplied that service within the Veterans' Administration.

I want to sort of take a different tact than the Chairman did because I do not want to plow ground that has already been plowed.

What can we do to strengthen the partnership between you and the Veterans' Administration? Naturally, it would start at the beginning of any initiative that they went out on; and I would be curious to ask, has the VA reached out to you on their August campaign to say, here is what we are getting ready to do? We are launching this massive ad campaign and here is how you fit.

Is there any dialog between you guys and the VA about how you fit and how your organizations supports what their mission is?

Let me just backwards if I can.

Mr. WEINGARTNER. So, I think that is a big problem, what you are articulating; and from my perspective, I think it would go both ways.

First, if a vet is in our purview in any of, say, the 30 programs that we recently funded, it is incumbent on the VA to make it really, really easy for us to push them into services that are uniquely funded by the VA.

Second, I would ask the VA to tell me, how do you demonstrate that every single vet that walks in this door has had some level of assessment and that the VA has established a partnership locally in literally every community where you would know that there is a warm handoff between the medical services and getting that vet a job and connecting that vet to food stamps and connecting that vet to housing? Because, literally, right now vets are walking in the door and there is no structure around the ability to handoff a vet into community programs which make up the vast majority of human services in any local community.

So, I would have them report back to you on what exactly is their structural relationship between the resources that are local.

So, I think Mr. Monroe talked a little bit about a Blueprint. Admiral Mullen, who is essentially our tutor in the veterans' space, basically indicated that you have to conceive of and implement a



local approach that is unique, and the VA would have to master that in every one of their communities and they should be held accountable for that.

Senator BURR. Just go down the line if anybody would like to comment on that.

Mr. MONROE. Ranking Member Burr, thank you.

For me, again, back to us being in startup mode—big VA, if you will—we have not had many touch points with them. I intend to get to where when I am up on plain reaching out with them. At the local level, I said a lot of the Blueprint communities, they are very nimble. They are small organizations. They are out there. They know where people are so they are able to make—

Senator BURR. You are in 22 States. You are in an unlimited amount of communities, 44 communities, 22 States, 75 veteran lead corps. You are a major force in the non-profit world to supply services to veterans.

Has the VA reached out to you and said, what is it you are doing so that we can figure out how it complements what we are trying to do?

Mr. MONROE. Not yet, sir.

Senator BURR. OK. Mr. Nee.

Mr. NEE. Thank you, Ranking Member. I think what we see with VA is that the collaboration really exists. It depends on the medical center. It depends on the Vet Center. It is all local to local.

So, if we have a Vet Center that is committed to working with the State, then we will do very well. When those veterans come in to get mental health services or VA specific health care services, they will then turn them over to us and we can do a benefits assessment to see what other State or local or non-profit benefits they are eligible for.

I think when we look at national models, what I would hope is that we are not talking about the Federal Government seeing what we are doing and then adopting it themselves, but rather providing the States the resources to augment or increase their local models.

For instance, Women Veteran's Networks, we have a very good one. We run it on a very tight budget, \$75,000 a year. It is not a lot of money but it does a lot of great good.

If VA were to make grants available for States to establish state-based Women Veterans' Networks, that would go a long way to its helping access benefits and services for women vets.

Senator BURR. Let me just ask you on the program.

Mr. NEE. Sure.

Senator BURR. Has VA come to you and said, gee, this is a very interesting model. We would like to roll this out in communities across the country. Can you help us do that?

Mr. NEE. They have a national Women Veteran's Network. They have not come to us specifically on our program, although we do collaborate pretty closely with them on getting women into VA health care services.

Senator BURR. But the unique thing about what all of you have provided us is the re-enforcement that these community-based programs are absolutely essential if the goal is to try to get everybody.

Now, if the goal is only to get 40 percent, then that is one thing; but if the goal is 100 percent, is there anybody that realistically be-

lieves that it can be done without a partnership within the communities that the veterans live in?

And, I think with the uniqueness of your program, it is more effective because it is community based.

Mr. NEE. Correct. I do not believe if we just rely on VA to serve veterans in this country that we will reach all the veterans. I think in order for us to serve all the veterans in this Nation and their family members as well, we need to have tight and coordinated partnerships with State, local, and non-profit organizations.

Otherwise, you just cannot meet all the needs.

Senator BURR. Mr. Chairman, you have been very generous. Thank you.

Chairman SANDERS. Thank you, Senator Burr.

Senator Blumenthal.

**STATEMENT OF HON. RICHARD BLUMENTHAL,  
U.S. SENATOR FROM CONNECTICUT**

Senator BLUMENTHAL. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank you for holding this hearing.

Thank you all for being here today and your excellent work in this very important area.

I was interested, Ms. Spencer, in your discussion of reserving spaces for veterans in some of the volunteer programs; I think you mentioned Teach for America, Volunteers of America, and the Washington Conservation Corps.

I wonder if you could provide some additional details as to other organizations that reserve spaces—what more can be done to provide those kinds of opportunities for veterans, and whether you think the veterans have been responsive to it?

Ms. SPENCER. Thank you, Senator Blumenthal.

We are very excited about the progress. When the Serve America Act was signed 4 years ago, we had seen a huge interest in our veterans work because it has become a key priority in our work with veterans and military families.

So, we are seeing the success in several ways. One is in the way which you have described us encouraging our grantees, our partners in the field, to reach out to veterans and military families as well, to recruit them to become AmeriCorps members or Senior Corps participants and also to become volunteers to serve alongside our formally enrolled AmeriCorps members or Senior Corps participants. That is one way.

Another way is by adding more grantees with our annual Notice of Funding opportunity, increasing the number of grantees who are serving veterans. This will also grow the opportunity to serve as well.

We are having very serious conversations. I just shared a few minutes ago with the VA about expanding a program called VetCorps which is helping veterans enrolled in college on the GI Bill succeed and graduate. We need them to graduate, and this is a program where we have veterans who are AmeriCorps members serving other veterans.

That is a real sweet spot of success for us because we then have that peer-to-peer connection. They understand what they are going through. They can relate. We are seeing a lot of success. And that

also applies to family members, because family members also understand the life of a veteran.

So, we are aggressively reaching out to our partners, our grantees, Veteran Service Organizations, working even with other Federal agencies. We have just announced a partnership with the National Guard Bureau where we are going to place AmeriCorps-VIS-TAs in every State Guard Bureau in the country that would like them to support veterans and military families with their economic needs.

We, hopefully very soon, are days away from signing an inter-agency agreement with the Department of Labor, and where this will work is our Senior Corps participants from RSVP will reach out and help transitioning servicemembers get a job, help them with job training, job skills, counseling.

So, there are endless the ways that we can work. We are working right now. We have five million volunteers—AmeriCorps member or Senior Corps participant—opportunities.

So, there is not a stone we are not turning over for reaching out and including them.

Senator BLUMENTHAL. You mentioned VetCorps?

Ms. SPENCER. Yes. VetCorps in Washington State.

Senator BLUMENTHAL. Is it just in one State right now?

Ms. SPENCER. Well, that particular program labeled VetCorps is in the State of Washington where we currently have about 50—it is growing—50 veterans or military family members serving in every public college in the State of Washington, reaching out and working. Last year, they served 7,100 veterans.

Senator BLUMENTHAL. There are similar organizations around the country.

Ms. SPENCER. Right. There is one in Georgia, Piedmont College, which is a very similar model. We are encouraging other grantees to consider this as a great model also.

Senator BLUMENTHAL. I appreciate what you said about veterans helping other veterans which seems to be the most productive way to help veterans, something about that common experience or bond that I think is almost irreplaceable. And I wonder if there is more that we can do to enlist veterans in these programs, either part-time or full-time.

Ms. SPENCER. I think there is, and it is working with my colleagues here today. It is working with other Federal agencies like the VA, Department of Labor, National Guard Bureau, and others who are interested in this. It is getting that word out.

But we have, as I mentioned, 5 million either volunteers or AmeriCorps members or Senior Corps participants who are passionate about this. We are in 70,000 locations across the country.

So, we have got the capacity. We have offices in every State. We have State commissions, Governor-appointed State commissions we work with very closely. All have our same goal: to help these 1.5 million veterans returning in the next 5 years, and those who have already returned home who need our help.

Senator BLUMENTHAL. Thank you.

Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman SANDERS. Thank you, Senator Blumenthal.

Let me just conclude by reiterating what I think you have heard from every Member here. We appreciate that if we are going to do justice for all veterans—the older veterans and those who are just returning—we are going to need a level of cooperation, a very strong level of cooperation between the VA and other Federal agencies as well as non-profits and State agencies throughout the country.

You are here today because in many ways you are models of what we would like to see. I just want to personally thank all of you for the great work that you are doing. We look forward to working with you in the future.

This hearing is adjourned.

[Whereupon, at 11:34 a.m., the Committee was adjourned.]

## A P P E N D I X

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### PREPARED STATEMENT OF MARTIN CARAWAY, LEGISLATIVE CHAIR, NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF COUNTY VETERANS SERVICE OFFICERS

Mr. Chairman, Members of the Committee, and staff: It is truly my honor to present this written testimony for this hearing. As Legislative Chair of the National Association of County Veterans Service Officers, I am submitting this testimony to comment on:

The issues regarding outreach services to veterans of military service of the United States of America.

The National Association of County Veterans Service Officers is an organization made up of local government employees. Local government employees that believe we can help the Department of Veterans Affairs reduce the number of backlogged benefits claims, while also providing critical outreach activities to educate veteran's and eligible dependents in rural and metropolitan areas alike.

Our members work in local government offices, in 37 States and currently are comprised of 2,400 full time employees in 700 communities. Every veteran, their dependents and their survivors who live in our respective jurisdictions are all our clients. We serve them at no cost to the client. We are equipped to handle, and ready to assist veterans one on one, with every Department of Veterans Affairs benefit, and every state and local benefits. The reason we are here today is to assist the Department of Veterans Affairs' and Chairman Sanders' initiatives in providing quality outreach to our veteran community.

There are over 22 million honorably discharged veterans of the Armed Forces of the United States. During the course of their life after the military they may have occasion to file a benefits claim for pension or compensation. Most veterans are not members of a Veterans Service Organization, but chances are that they live within one of our communities served by a State, County, or City Veterans Service Officer. In many cases the citizens of our communities believe that we are the VA.

When military members leave the armed services they all have heard of the VA, and may be aware of some of the benefits they are entitled to, yet upon arrival to their home state they do not necessarily know how to actively pursue those benefits. Outreach has, for many years, been a focus of the National Association of County Veterans Service Officers. We define outreach as "the act or process of reaching out in a systematic manner to proactively provide information and services and benefits counseling to veterans, and to the spouses, children, and parents of veterans who may be eligible to receive benefits under the laws administered by the Secretary of Veterans Affairs; and to ensure that such individuals are fully informed about, and assisted in applying for, any benefits and programs under such laws."

We believe that our members are in the perfect situation to meaningfully reach out to our Nation's veterans. We are already there in 37 States with 2,400 full time employees in 700 communities. It makes sense to utilize these existing government employees, who are employed by their local governments to provide the desperately needed services to our returning military veterans. Many of our members are fully accredited with the Department of Veterans Affairs, have attended and successfully completed Training, Responsibility, Involvement and Preparation of Claims (TRIP) training and have had a background check performed on them as a condition of employment.

There has been much cooperation between the Federal, State and Local Government over many years. There are cooperative Memorandums of Understanding (MOU) with the Department of Agriculture, Department of Justice, and other Federal arms of government routinely signed every year. Many Federal agencies provide funding to local agencies to assist them with Federal responsibilities. The United States Forest Service cooperatively works with local jurisdictions to safe-

guard the resources on the National Forest. The Drug Enforcement Administration provides funding to local law enforcement agencies to expand their impact in the war on drugs. Federal funding of local agencies is widely used and accepted throughout the United States and could be easily expanded to include the Department of Veterans Affairs.

In this day and age of our great nation it is unthinkable that a young man or woman enters the military service, serves honorably, and then upon discharge finds difficulties in obtaining the rights and benefits that they earned through service and sacrifice. It is our responsibility, the people of the United States, to live up to that promise of a better and brighter future. That promise includes a myriad of veterans benefits should the servicemember become injured in defense of freedom; but also includes an underlying premise that says if you serve your country with honor, your country will be there to serve you—not with a handout, but with a hand up. Together we must develop a mechanism for solutions so that veterans are able to return and earn their part of the American Dream.

The National Association of County Veterans Service Officers is grateful for this opportunity to testify to this Committee. We recommend that this Committee look into ways to expand services to veterans by utilizing local governmental agencies. This concept has the potential to make a significant difference in the lives of returning veterans and will afford them a better opportunity to obtain their earned benefits, in a timely manner. Thank you for your time and attention.

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PREPARED STATEMENT OF SHERRI L. BROWN, SENIOR VICE PRESIDENT, SERVICE TO THE ARMED FORCES, AMERICAN RED CROSS

Chairman Sanders, Ranking Member Burr, and distinguished Members of the Veterans' Affairs Committee: I would like to commend the Committee for holding this hearing on Veterans Affairs Outreach and Community Partnerships and I appreciate the opportunity to submit this written testimony on behalf of the American Red Cross.

The American Red Cross shelters, feeds and provides emotional support to victims of disasters; supplies about 40 percent of the Nation's blood; teaches skills that save lives; provides international humanitarian aid; and relevant to this testimony, supports military members and their families.

The American Red Cross has supported servicemembers, veterans and their families for more than a century. Our military and veteran services are our oldest, most foundational and cherished mission passed down through generations. As a veteran myself, I am honored to support this mission today.

GENERAL OVERVIEW OF SUPPORT FOR OUR VETERANS

The Red Cross began providing service to veterans in 1917, when we opened the Institute for Crippled and Disabled Men in New York City. The Institute specialized in occupational training for those returning from World War I with missing limbs. As the war ended, more programs were introduced to address the large number of maimed and disabled Veterans returning to civilian life. To aid their needs, innovative occupational therapy and recreational programs were implemented in Veterans Hospitals.

When the United States Veterans Bureau was established by Congress in August 1921 as the official agency responsible for the care of veterans, Red Cross support of ill and injured veterans continued through the Hospital and Recreation Corps, the Junior Red Cross, and what later became known as the Gray Lady Service of uniformed volunteer nurses.

Today, our work with veterans continues and includes emergency services such as emergency communications and financial assistance: support for the wounded, ill and injured in VA medical facilities and local communities; reintegration and resiliency support; and providing opportunities for volunteerism. Our network is far-reaching and available around the clock.

Red Cross offices across the country and around the world participate in education and outreach events throughout the cycle of military service. Beginning with new recruits at Military Entrance Processing Stations, pre-deployment briefings, welcome home events, family days, and others, we get the word out on how to reach the Red Cross and what types of support we can provide. We are there for community based outreach events in partnership with Veteran Service Organizations such as the American Legion, Veterans of Foreign Wars, Disabled American Veterans, and their Auxiliaries; fraternal and service organizations such as the Elks, Lions, and Rotary; faith-based organizations and others.

The Red Cross is able to provide these important services through employees and volunteers who work alongside the military community across the country and around the world. This includes a network of 1,200 Red Cross offices both on installations and in communities across the country. Currently, we also have staff and volunteers serving with deployed servicemembers in Afghanistan, Djibouti, and Kuwait.

A cornerstone of Red Cross support to the United States Armed Forces is our emergency communications services. When a military family experiences a crisis, the American Red Cross is there to help. Wherever their military service takes them, servicemembers can rest assured that the Red Cross will deliver notification of an emergency such as the death or serious illness of an immediate family member, as well as the good news of the birth of a servicemember's child or grandchild. Twenty-four hours a day, 365 days a year, the Red Cross relays urgent messages containing accurate, factual, complete and verified descriptions of the emergency to servicemembers stationed anywhere in the world, including on ships at sea and at embassies and remote locations. During fiscal year 2012, the Red Cross provided over 320,000 emergency communication services to 131,000 military members and their families, including nearly \$7 million in financial assistance to more than 6,000 families on behalf of the military aid societies.

In addition to our emergency communications services and support to servicemembers on installations, the Red Cross has two resiliency courses to assist servicemembers, veterans and their families with the challenges of deployment. Both of these psycho-educational courses are led by independently licensed mental health volunteers and are available to anyone impacted by a military deployment—particularly those who directly support the servicemember, such as spouses, parents, siblings and significant others, and includes all branches of the Armed Forces. The courses are offered through Red Cross offices in the United States, its territories and through installations in the European region.

Coping with Deployments: Psychological First Aid for Military Families was launched in October 2008 to assist military family members before and during a deployment cycle. The skill building course teaches family members how to strengthen their ability to successfully respond to challenges that they may encounter when a loved one is away. The course also explains how to support others experiencing stressful feelings or events. Since 2008, approximately 4,500 people have participated in the instructor-led course.

In September 2011, the Red Cross launched Reconnection Workshops, a series of small-group, interactive courses for military families that focus on reintegration following deployment. The course was developed with the assistance of the Walmart Foundation and consists of five different topics that servicemembers and their families identified as critical to the reintegration period: managing anger, communication techniques, identifying depression, understanding and supporting the needs of children, and recognizing issues around stress and Traumatic Brain Injury. The Red Cross has reached nearly 4,000 people with this course.

In short, we work at the community level to ensure the veteran and his or her family knows what resources are available to them in their hometown, that our efforts reflect their needs, and the community is working together to serve them.

#### COMMUNITY BASED PARTNERSHIPS AND THE VA

The Red Cross does much of our work through partnerships. The strong relationships we have with the Department of Defense, the Department of Veterans Affairs and the many other local and national non-profits who serve the military community are invaluable to our mission. An important facet is ensuring that what the Red Cross provides is both relevant to those we serve, and also complementary to the government and other community resources available. I cannot over-emphasize that no one organization can provide everything that a veteran and his or her family may need. Each organization brings something unique to the table, and we must continue to work closely together to ensure the assistance is well placed and reaches those who need it.

The Red Cross works closely with the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). The Red Cross is one of six charter members when Veterans Affairs Volunteer Services (VAVS) was formed in 1946, and proudly stands as a leader among more than 7,400 local and national organizations. We are classified as a Servicemember (voting) Organization, which requires a minimum of participation on 30 VAVS advisory committees. Additionally, we hold a seat on the VAVS Executive Committee (EC). Red Cross Chapters nationwide have representatives on more than 90 VAVS Advisory Committees and provide services in 139 VA Medical facilities.

In addition, more than 900 Red Cross volunteers work an average of 80,000 hours in VA facilities annually and are active in every aspect of the VA Voluntary Service program. Red Cross volunteers contribute in a number of ways, including Red Cross College Clubs creating mobile gardens for Community Living Centers; youth interviewing patients for the Library of Congress Veterans History Project; Veterans helping Veterans get to medical appointments through the Volunteer Transportation Program; and licensed medical professionals giving their time to those who served our country.

In March 2012, Red Cross volunteer, Joy Neulieb, from Battle Creek, Michigan, received the VA Volunteer Services Committee Female Volunteer of the Year Award for her services in the Community Living Center, In Patient Mental Health and Therapeutic Recreation Section of the Battle Creek Michigan VA Medical Center. Ms. Neulieb is a shining example of Red Cross in action.

Our work with the VA extends beyond serving those veterans in a VA hospital facility. The VA Crisis Line connects veterans with qualified VA responders through a confidential hotline. Through our partnership with the VA, we recognized that collaboration between our Emergency Communications Center and the VA Crisis Line could literally help save lives. More than once a day (478 times last year), the Red Cross Emergency Communications Center receives calls from family members seeking our intervention when a servicemember or veteran has indicated they might harm themselves. Now, when the VA Crisis Line receives a call concerning someone on active duty and they cannot quickly locate the individual, the Red Cross is immediately brought in to assist by working with the military. Additionally, we work closely with the VA Crisis Line in situations where the Red Cross is contacted concerning a veteran to provide immediate and compassionate assistance.

Through a network of Veteran Service Officers, the Red Cross assists veterans, widows, widowers and dependents with the preparation and submission of claims and at the Board of Veterans' Appeals office in Washington, DC.

The Red Cross also acknowledges the tremendous resource our veterans are to the work force. The American Red Cross Military Outreach Program is designed to build a robust pipeline of talent from the veteran and military spouse communities and hire qualified candidates to support the mission of the organization. In 2012, the Red Cross set an aggressive goal to hire 1,000 veterans by the end of 2014. This commitment includes not only placing veterans in appropriate positions, but also developing training and transition programs for servicemembers and spouses.

#### PARTNERSHIPS AND PILOT PROGRAMS

Red Cross collaboration to support veterans also extends beyond those ties we have with the VA. Several years ago, a coalition of more than 50 non-profit and government leaders got together to discuss how we could better work together and really make a difference for the military and veteran communities. One effort that developed from the meeting was rooted in what so many of us have seen at the local level—that is, building powerful community coalitions to deliver tremendous benefits. This initiative is now called “the Community Blueprint Network.” The Community Blueprint is a set of tools and practices that provide a framework for communities to produce positive, measurable outcomes for veterans, military members and their families. It is administered by our partner, the Points of Light Institute, under the leadership of my colleague, Mike Monroe.

The Red Cross is sponsoring one of the Community Blueprint pilot sites in South Florida. The coalition is focusing on reintegration for veterans by helping bridge the gaps that can sometimes exist between leaving the military and returning to the community. The program focuses on the individual veteran by assessing their needs and developing an individual plan which may include peer support, assistance for health, education, employment, and other issues. The Red Cross does not provide all these things by itself, but works with our partners to ensure the veteran gets what he or she needs. For example, all veterans who participate in the program are assisted with registration for VA benefits, and those requiring assistance beyond those services offered by the VA are connected with one of our partners.

The Metropolitan Atlanta Chapter of the American Red Cross is also supporting a Community Blueprint initiative with the charge of becoming the conduit for veterans to gain access to the full range of support available to them. This coalition consists of a group of over 40 agencies including national entities such as Goodwill Industries, the VA Regional Office, United Way 211, as well as local organizations like Hope Atlanta and Warriors 2 Citizens.

Several Red Cross chapters have formed strong state and local partnerships to provide support to the veteran community. Through a state AmeriCorps program, the American Red Cross Southern Arizona Region engages AmeriCorps members to



reach the military community and provide Red Cross services including recruiting other volunteers, sharing the overall Red Cross message, helping with development/fundraising, volunteering at the VA hospital, and acting as a force multiplier on military installations.

The Southern Arizona Region, with support from a Supportive Services to Veterans and Families grant from the Department of Veterans Affairs, initiated a program to help prevent and address veteran homelessness. The program is staffed by individuals specializing in intake, housing, finance, employment outreach and other areas to provide a temporary bridge of support leading to self-sufficiency through employment or receipt of VA and/or other entitlements they may be due. This support may come in the way of financial assistance with rent, utilities, moving related and other expenses, and case management services to assist with receiving VA and other local-community based support.

#### CONCLUSION

Thank you again for the opportunity to submit this testimony. These are just a few examples of how the Red Cross has been called to action in partnership with community-based organizations as well as with the VA and other government agencies. We are pleased to work with our partners in the VA as well as our partners in the non-profit, government and private sectors and are working hard to improve efficiencies and to increase individual and community awareness.

Finally, support for our veterans is and will remain steadfast. As the US Armed Forces withdraw from Afghanistan and more servicemembers transition to civilian life, it will be more important than ever that we all continue to work together to meet the needs of the changing veteran community. The Red Cross is committed to working side by side with the VA and other organizations to provide the network of support our veterans deserve.

I am pleased to address any questions you may have and look forward to working with members of Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee and others to support our veterans and their families.

Thank you.

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PREPARED STATEMENT OF J. MICHAEL HAYNIE, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, INSTITUTE FOR  
VETERANS AND MILITARY FAMILIES, SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY



**SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY**  
**INSTITUTE FOR VETERANS AND MILITARY FAMILIES**  
*"in service to those who have served"*

WRITTEN TESTIMONY OF

**J. MICHAEL HAYNIE**  
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR,  
INSTITUTE FOR VETERANS AND MILITARY FAMILIES  
SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY

PRESENTED TO  
**SENATE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS**  
APRIL 24, 2013

Chairman Bernard Sanders (VT), Ranking Member Richard Burr (NC), and members of the Senate Veterans Affairs Committee – thank you for inviting me to submit testimony related to the important topic of VA Outreach and Community Partnerships.

My name is Dr. Michael Haynie, and I serve as the Executive Director of the Institute for Veterans and Military Families (IVMF) at Syracuse University. I'm also a veteran of the United States Air Force. As such, I'm proud and honored to have the opportunity to share with the committee some of what the team at the IVMF has come to understand with regard to the critical role that VA outreach is positioned to play in harnessing the social, financial, and intellectual capital of the private sector in support of the nation's veterans and their families.

The IVMF was created as the nation's first interdisciplinary academic institute focused on leveraging the resources of higher-education in support of the post-service life course of America's veterans and their families. In the context of the IVMF's research mission, as well as our team's ongoing engagement with the veterans' community, it's clear that a coordinated national effort positioned to address the post-service concerns of veterans must represent a policy priority.<sup>i</sup> To that end, academicians, policymakers, veteran service organizations, and other stakeholders continue to highlight how and why public-private partnerships are uniquely suited as a means to effectively empower what could become America's next Greatest Generation.

Outreach as a *call to action* is a wholly appropriate framing of this important issue. One seminal finding drawn from the IVMF's ongoing engagement with community-based organizations, private sector employers, educational institutions, and veteran service organizations (VSOs) is that the "Sea of Goodwill" described by Admiral Mullen and others does indeed exist.<sup>ii</sup> Regardless of attitudes about the recent wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, public sentiment focused toward the military and its veterans is at an all-time high. Importantly however, our work has also made very clear that the extent to which that "Sea of Goodwill" will overwhelm those it purports to serve – or instead be leveraged in a systematic way so as to complement government programs and services to the benefit of veterans and their families – depends in large part on the efforts of the VA and other federal agencies with regard to

conducting effective outreach to private sector stakeholders to the veterans community; that is, outreach that serves to align the resources of non-governmental partners in a way that's coordinated, efficient, and responsive to the needs of veterans, and at the same time is positioned to nurture enduring civic engagement focused on veterans' issues.<sup>ii</sup> This later point is less understood and undervalued in the context of the benefits of VA outreach to the private sector, and is thus worth emphasizing. The extent to which the VA and other governmental organizations actively and meaningfully engage the private sector related to veterans' concerns correlates directly to reinforcing norms of citizenship linked to how and why military service *must* be valued by society in the age of an all-volunteer military force structure (AVF). In other words, such engagement reinforces President Lincoln's pledge "to care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and his orphan" as an enduring societal promise that holds true for this and future generations of veterans.

All this said, there are five principle motivations that underlie the imperative of timely and robust VA outreach to the private sector, related to veterans' issues, programs, and policies:

- 1) Effective and comprehensive outreach supports efficient service delivery and principled resource allocation in the face of a constrained fiscal environment across the federal government. In 2013, the VA will direct an estimated \$140.3 billion to veteran-related programs and services, and many have suggested this level of expenditure will increase substantially over the next decade.<sup>iii</sup> In fact, Harvard Professor Linda Bilmes writes that:

*"The history of previous wars shows that the cost of caring for war veterans rises for several decades, and peaks in 30 to 40 years or more after a conflict. This will be especially true for veterans of the current wars. Veterans from Iraq and Afghanistan are utilizing VA medical services and applying for disability benefits at much higher rates than in previous wars."*

In the face of resource constraints across government, it's possible that veterans' programs and benefits will become vulnerable to future spending reductions. If this situation were to come to pass, it's important that the private and not-for-profit sectors are positioned to serve as a secondary support network for veterans and their families, complementing and augmenting government services in a way that supports effective transition.

- 2) The foundational logic supporting the all-volunteer force (AVF) makes civic engagement in the concerns of those who serve the nation in uniform a social and security imperative. The AVF has fostered a situation where a shared burden for national defense is an artifact of the past; as such, increasingly fewer members of our society have any tangible connection to the military.<sup>iv</sup> This distance is evident in the fact that today, both veterans and non-veterans agree that the American public does not fully understand the complex challenges facing the nation's veterans and military families. Managing this divide requires carefully balancing the inherent tensions between the military's functional purpose of maintaining a distinct ethos and set of values necessary to provide effective security, while at the same time ensuring this effort remains sensibly responsive to, and culturally integrated with, American society.<sup>v</sup> As such, VA outreach to the private sector serves the purpose of institutionalizing a three-way dialogue between the public, the military, and the government that nurtures stable civil-military relations in the long-term through increased opportunity for public participation in the concerns of veterans and their families.

- 3) The number, breadth, and focus of private sector and not-for-profit organizations serving veterans and their families are overwhelming to many seeking to utilize available services and supports. Between July 2001 and August 2012, there was a 181% increase in the number of registered veteran support nonprofit organizations filing a Form 990 with the Internal Revenue Service, with a corresponding increase of \$2.9 trillion in reported total assets (National Center for Charitable Statistics).<sup>iii</sup> Many of these organizations provide important and effective services to the nation's veterans while many others – though well-intended – are fundamentally disconnected from the true needs of the veterans' community. Focused and comprehensive VA outreach is positioned to serve the purpose of more smartly aligning and focusing private sector resources, toward the most pressing needs of veterans and their families.
- 4) The private sector is uniquely positioned to support the social and economic transition from military to civilian life in a way that the VA and other governmental organizations cannot. The issue of veterans' employment is a clear and compelling example. For example, the past several years have been witness to unprecedented efforts by many in the private sector in response to the deteriorating post-service employment situation of contemporary veterans. Consider the efforts of the 100,000 Jobs Mission – a consortium of private sector firms collaborating to hire veterans led by JPMorgan Chase – resulting in the successful employment of more than 64,000 veterans in the past 18 months.<sup>ix</sup> Consider the efforts of the consortium of large manufacturers united under the “Get Skills to Work” initiative led by GE, committed to creating careers in manufacturing for more than 15,000 veterans. Consider the work of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, which over the past two years has held more than 400 job fairs for veterans across the U.S. Such efforts must be recognized, supported, and nurtured through effective and comprehensive outreach from the VA. It's clear from our research and engagement with the veterans' community that the most effective way to support the transition of service members to civilian life is to engage private sector actors in that effort.
- 5) Finally and most importantly, robust public-private partnership is likely to generate the holistic “wrap-around” supports proven most effective in facilitating a successful transition from military to civilian life. Research suggests that the transition from military to civilian life is, for many, discontinuous and even traumatic. An important component of successfully navigating such a transition involves transitioning one's identity; that is, supporting the transition of the individual's “sense of self” from a Soldier, Sailor, Airman, or Marine to that of civilian and citizen.<sup>x</sup> The most effective way to realize this goal is to situate supports and services in a civilian societal context. Engaging the private sector in support of the transition of service members to civilian life is essential to cultivate healthy and meaningful integration of veterans into civilian society.

Given the foundational arguments detailed above in support of VA outreach to the private sector, we suggest that *now* is the time to institutionalize processes and practices designed to harness the “Sea of Goodwill” for this and future generations of veterans. While veterans are honored in American society today, this social distinction is neither a historical constant, nor is it assured for future generations.<sup>xi</sup> Inevitably, a consequence of the end of America's longest wartime chapter will be a diminished public focus on veterans' issues. As such, now is the time to act on the opportunity to institutionalize public-private collaboration as the norm of policy and service delivery.

In that vein, it's to the VA's great credit that over the past year outreach to the private and not-for-profit sector has been unprecedented. In fact, in the context of my seven years working in the veteran's community, I have not witnessed a time where the VA has been more willing, open, and transparent with regard to efforts to engage the private sector in service to veterans and their families. For example, the VA recently initiated a series of convening events designed to solicit feedback from the not-for-profit community, and these efforts have included personal engagement from the most senior VA leadership – to include the VA Secretary himself. Further, these efforts have also been accompanied by an enhanced level of transparency from the VA with regard to both its success and its ongoing challenges. It's clear and apparent that such efforts are beginning to bear fruit, and therefore building from these important steps should represent a priority for the VA outreach team. In that vein, the following might represent priority initiatives for VA, related to outreach as a call to action:

- 1) The VA should develop, through collaboration with the private sector, a clear strategic vision that informs their outreach. This vision should be articulated and disseminated both inside and outside of VA, to supporting embedding the notion of outreach into the VA culture.
- 2) The VA should develop, through collaboration with the private sector, a strategic outreach strategy which details processes and practices positioned to implement the outreach vision. This strategy should incorporate a plan and processes related to evaluating and measuring the extent of outreach conducted by the VA, as well as the efficacy of such outreach as correlated to the social, economic, and health & wellness concerns of veterans and their families.
- 3) The VA should expand and prioritize outreach to the academic community, related to the concerns of veterans and their families. Data-driven scholarship that informs veterans' policy is central to principled policy formulation, implementation and evaluation – especially in the face of an increasingly complex universe of economic, social, and policy challenges impacting veterans and military families. This scholarship, consequently, demands an interdisciplinary perspective to draw upon and integrate important intellectual contributions from multiple academic disciplines and fields of practice. Such a level of coordinated, interdisciplinary scholarship aimed at accumulating policy-relevant and actionable knowledge on veterans' issues does not presently exist. Such an effort demands robust collaboration between the VA and the academic community, and a focused outreach strategy will help cultivate, unite and organize an interdisciplinary field of veteran studies in higher-education, which supports principled policymaking and effective service delivery.

In the end, the research and programmatic engagement of the IVMF has highlighted to our team that a comprehensive and institutionalized VA outreach strategy – focused toward bridging and uniting the public and private sector related to veterans' issues – represents an absolute imperative. Such an effort is positioned to serve important economic, social and security objectives that impact both our veterans, but also more broadly the nation. Expanding and institutionalizing a strategic approach to VA outreach represents a step toward a 'whole-of-the-nation' model of empowering those who have worn the cloth of the nation, and is consistent with the inherent social contract that defines the relationship between America and its veterans.

Thank you for the honor and opportunity to contribute to the important work of this committee.

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700 University Avenue / Suite 303 / Syracuse, NY 13244  
315-443-0141 / Fax: 315-443-2654 / <http://vets.syr.edu>

PREPARED STATEMENT OF DAVID W. SUTHERLAND, COLONEL, U.S. ARMY, RETIRED  
CHAIRMAN AND CO-FOUNDER OF STAFF SERGEANT DONNIE D. DIXON CENTER FOR  
MILITARY AND VETERANS COMMUNITY SERVICES (DIXON CENTER)

Chairman Sanders, Ranking Member Burr and Members of the Committee, Thank you for inviting me to share my views and ideas on how our country can better assist America's veterans through community partnerships. This is a topic I am very passionate about and so I appreciate the opportunity to address this distinguished panel. My name is David Sutherland and I am the Chairman and Co-Founder of the Staff Sergeant Donnie D. Dixon Center for Military and Veterans

Community Services (Dixon Center), a catalyst for bringing community leaders, organizations and service providers together to help integrate and strengthen local services for veterans and military families. I also speak today as a veteran of the United States Army with 29 years of service, including multiple deployments during Operation Desert Shield/Desert Storm and Operation Iraqi Freedom. I retired in 2012 as a U.S. Army Colonel where my final assignment was as the Special Assistant to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. In that position, my principle focus was on Warrior and Family Support.

My military service over two wars informs me about the difficult challenges facing America's veterans and motivates me to help empower returning servicemembers, military veterans, their families and the families of our fallen to achieve their capacity for greatness. This generation, like all generations of veterans, is wired to serve. And they have served with distinction against enormous challenges. Most returning servicemembers and their families have not known a time when we haven't been at war, preparing for war or coming home from war. During the last 11 years of my Army career, I spent a cumulative three years at home. Of course, war has had an impact on America's military veterans and their families. But I have no doubt they will thrive. They just need a little help during transition to get them started and they will achieve great things. They represent the best of our society. In my work with the Joint Chiefs of Staff and my advocacy through Dixon Center, I am convinced that the answers to the challenges facing our country's veterans already exist in our neighborhoods and communities. The goal for this Committee and for all Americans should be to increase community involvement and promote community-based services through public-private partnerships to advance education, employment and access to health care for veterans and their families.

*The Story of Mervin:*

Mervin Roxas is one of those veterans on the road to greatness thanks to a little community support during his recent transition. Mervin was born in the Philippines but moved to the United States with his family when he was a teenager. Motivated to serve his adopted country following the attacks on September 11, Mervin joined the United States Marines and was twice deployed to Iraq. On his second tour of duty, Mervin was seriously injured when an improvised explosive device (IED) blew up his patrol vehicle. He was riding in the top position manning the vehicle's machine gun. The bomb ripped off his entire left arm and part of his shoulder and shattered his jaw and cheekbone. Three Marines died from injuries caused by the IED explosion. That was July 5, 2004; Mervin was only 21 years old. He was evacuated out of the war zone and later to Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington, DC, where he spent 11 months in specialized medical care and rehabilitative services. The military awarded Mervin the Purple Heart for his service. After being medically discharged from Walter Reed, Mervin returned to California to be with his family and to restart his new life. But Mervin struggled early on in his transition. He no longer had easy access to the supports and resources readily available to him throughout his military career. He and his family had to navigate the social service and government systems on their own, with little support or guidance. "The direction I was used to in the military wasn't there for me," Mervin said, "I was basically let loose in the civilian world after being discharged with little direction. It was pretty tough to cope with at the beginning." Mervin also had to deal with the new changes to his life as a result of his disability. His dream of becoming a police officer was finished and his hopes for the future were diminished. "I was angry about the situation, confused, and I guess kind of depressed as well," Mervin said.

VETERANS JUST NEED A LITTLE HELP DURING TRANSITION

Mervin's early struggles to cope with his new life and his initial challenges during transition are not unique. Veterans can struggle with isolation and the negative stigma often associated with veterans of war. Stories similar to Mervin's can be found throughout the country. The personal struggles may vary, but generally involve mental health stress, unemployment, homelessness, broken relationships, or substance abuse. Consider these statistics:

- Young veterans, ages 20 to 24, who served during Gulf War era II had an unemployment rate of 29% in 2011, higher than that of young non-veterans (18%), according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. In addition:
  - 24% of veterans are unable to find a job that matches their skill level;
  - 11% are unable to find a job that matches their education level;
  - Almost two-thirds of those employed are unsatisfied with their work and report that they aren't using their skills and abilities; and

- 44% of part-time workers could not find full-time employment.
- Over one-third of servicemembers from Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom (OIF/OEF) suffer from post-traumatic stress (PTS) and mild Traumatic Brain Injuries (TBI), according to a recent RAND study. These are the signature wounds of these wars.
- More veterans have died by suicide since 9/11 than in combat in Iraq and Afghanistan combined. Women veterans are 2-3 times more likely to commit suicide than non-veteran women, according to an Oregon Health and Science University study.
- Twelve percent of all homeless veterans are OIF/OEF veterans, according to the National Coalition for Homeless Veterans.
  - 33% of the male homeless population are veterans;
  - 67% served three or more years; and
  - 76% experience alcohol, drug or mental health problems; and
  - 20% of female veterans are homeless.
- About 1.5 million other veterans are considered at risk of homelessness due to poverty, lack of support networks, and dismal living conditions in overcrowded or substandard housing.

The personal stories of heartache and struggle—combined with these and other harsh statistics—should motivate all leaders and citizens to examine new solutions to address the transition needs of our returning servicemembers and veterans. The drawdown of troops from Iraq and Afghanistan accelerates the challenges and widens the gaps in transition services for veterans and their families. Each year, the military discharges or demobilizes, on average, 350,000 servicemembers or roughly the population the size of the city of St. Louis. However these men and women—many who have confronted multiple deployments and combat tours—will not return to a single metropolitan area. Instead, they will return to their hometowns or other communities across the country. U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) data shows that U.S. veterans live in more than 3,100 counties that represent rural areas, like Calhoun County, Arkansas, or urban areas, like Cook County (Chicago), Illinois. Even those who generally look to the Federal Government (Department of Veterans Affairs) as the sole answer in addressing veterans' needs realize that the geographic diversity and the expected spike in the veterans' population (1 million over the next 5 years) require a new approach and a new way of thinking. There is only so much the government can do, alone.

The solution to these complex challenges already exists within the communities our veterans come home to—because the best remedy to defeating the stresses from combat for our veterans is finding a community and “fitting in.” More than anything else, veterans—myself included—want to be connected to community. Communities are the center of gravity; they solve the problems, provide the leadership, develop the solutions, offer empathy and provide the continuum of care. Communities are critical to our country's ability to do right by the veterans who have bravely worn the uniform. Based on my extensive outreach over the past five years, both as the Special Assistant to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and in my current role as Chairman of Dixon Center, I have seen first-hand the “sea of goodwill” that exists across the country. The American people share a tremendous desire and commitment to serve our veterans, military families, and the families of the fallen.

Unfortunately, a disconnect exists within these communities. Many communities and their leaders may know what the military is, but they don't know us. Less than one percent of the American public has ever served in the U.S. Armed Services. Many communities—their leaders, residents and services providers—have made services for veterans and military families a top priority, but often they are encumbered by bureaucracy and denied access to service resources by the very government entities charged with caring for and supporting U.S. veterans. As a result, veterans and their families become more isolated from essential services and supports and their reintegration struggles continue, often leading to new concerns that negatively play out in their relationships, families, workplaces and communities.

#### COMMUNITIES WORKING TOGETHER ON BEHALF OF VETERANS

Mervin, the young Marine I told you about earlier, is now fully contributing in his California community and achieving greatness. His U.S. Marine Corps training taught him to be courageous, decisive, and resilient. So he took the initiative to explore his community and find or develop his own supports. He enrolled in classes at a local college and looked for opportunities to volunteer in the community. Mervin admits his transition to college was difficult at first. “In the beginning, I had a hard time dealing with the new environment with the other students and people who



didn't really understand me or my situation. It took about a year to realize that I had to adjust myself." Mervin tapped into a community of other student veterans at his college. This informal support system, which later grew to include non-veteran friends, was there when he needed someone to talk to. "They understood. They were there to help, but they didn't pretend to know the answers to my problems," he said.

One day while at college, Mervin stumbled upon a job fair and decided to see what employment opportunities his community had to offer a decorated veteran. Mervin is representative of the new generation of veterans I mentioned earlier that is wired to serve. He was drawn to a booth staffed by Easter Seals Southern California. Easter Seals provides services to help children and adults with disabilities and/or special needs as well as support to their families for nearly 100 years. Today, Easter Seals assists more than one million individuals and their families annually through a network of more than 70 affiliates that operate more than 550 Easter Seals service sites across the country. Each affiliate provides top-quality, innovative services tailored to meet the specific needs of the people we serve. Mervin was also attracted to Easter Seals' national commitment to veterans and military families. "We just kind of clicked," Mervin recalled. But there was one problem: he didn't have his resume, at least not with him. The Easter Seals representative saw special qualities in Mervin and told him to send his resume to his office as quickly as possible. By that evening, Mervin had faxed his resume to Easter Seals and, soon after, he was hired as a Life Skills Coach—teaching life skills to adults with developmental disabilities. The extra little help he received at the job fair started him on the path toward success. He has since gotten married, been promoted at work, and ran a marathon—raising money for a local veterans support program as a way of giving back to the community that had supported him in his transition to civilian life. Mervin, now 30, did not need much of a push to get him going. The community supports and assistance he needed, he found on his own. Sometimes the community support was as simple as the routineness of everyday life in his hometown. "When I returned, I went to the same barber I had been going to since I was in high school. We'd just make conversation, talk about events in the news, how things were going—the usual things," Mervin said. "Even that simple connection to people outside the military, having that routine, going to a place where I knew people. Just those little things really do make you feel connected to your community."

Other veterans may require intensive services and supports or additional assistance in connecting to community and government programs. To help meet these needs, thousands of new nonprofit organizations have formed over the past decade. In addition, existing community organizations have developed new programs or reprioritized services to meet the emerging transition needs of veterans and military families that, in many cases, are going unmet due to the Federal Government's disappointing response to this underserved population. For example:

- Student Veterans of America (SVA) was formed after the passage of the Post-9/11 G.I. Bill when many OEF/OIF veterans started school and found that their campuses were unprepared to support them as they pursued their education. Since 2008, SVA has provided programs, resources, and support to the ever-evolving network of local student veteran organizations. I serve on the SVA Board of Directors and work closely with the chapter leadership across the country to affect change and generate action.

- The "Community Blueprint" is a roadmap for local communities across America to address the most common challenges facing Veterans, returning servicemembers and their families by transforming goodwill into service. The Community Blueprint is a set of tools and practices that provide a framework for communities to produce positive, measurable outcomes for veterans, military members and their families.

- Allies in Service is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization dedicated to serving our veterans, servicemembers and their families as they reintegrate back into the Dallas community. Under the leadership of Roger Staubach, they have developed a community-based model to improve the overall quality of life for Dallas-area veterans.

- Utility Workers Military Assistance—UMAP National Effort is designed to assist those men and women transitioning from the military into the civilian sector with gainful career opportunities in the Utility Workers sector and other labor affiliated program opportunities. In addition to workforce development and assistance UMAP provides support to their own military veteran members and their families. On a national level they partner with the military affiliates from all branches and work shoulder to shoulder with those on a national base that have developed and will continue to provide support to our veterans, Guard and Reserve candidates and their families.

- Charlotte Home Bridge helps Charlotte veterans successfully transition home after military service by identifying their education, employment and healthcare

needs and connecting them to available community, state and Federal resources. The result of this work results in: veterans and their families in successfully pursuing their dreams of building a healthy and productive life in the Charlotte region; community benefits from their leadership and commitment; and a reduced drain on community resources.

- The International Brotherhood of Teamsters formed its Helmets to Hardhats (H2H) program and Teamsters Military Assistance Program (TMAP) to connect highly trained, unemployed veterans with training and career opportunities in the construction industry. Under TMAP, veterans and Guard and Reserve members can receive, at no cost, apprenticeship and other training that leads to industry credentials. The Teamsters, like other organizations, found the high unemployment rate among veterans, particularly among the OIF/OEF generation, unacceptable and developed their own programs to compliment government efforts.

- The Welcome Back Veterans Initiative was formed in 2008 by Major League Baseball Charities, the McCormick Foundation and the Entertainment Industry Foundation to ensure veterans suffering from posttraumatic stress and their families had access to mental health education and treatments backed by cutting-edge research at our Nation's University Hospitals. These organizations were motivated by the newspaper headlines addressing the mental health challenges of our returning servicemembers and developed and funded this effort to help address the long delays or gaps in mental health services at the VA and the Department of Defense.

The emergence of these new military and veterans' organizations and service initiatives (while well-intentioned) has created two new problems that can further impede the ability of veterans and returning servicemembers to access transition assistance. First, there is no reliable, community-based coordination mechanism to integrate and consolidate community services so that veterans and military families aren't simply bouncing back and forth between bureaucratic mazes. Second, Federal policies and operating procedures make it difficult, if not impossible, for qualified new and well-established community organizations to access Federal resources or assist Federal agencies in serving the veterans and families in their communities. The Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee can play a meaningful role in each of these areas.

#### COORDINATING COMMUNITY-BASED SERVICES

During my work with the Joint Chiefs of Staff, I was introduced to numerous military and veterans' programs in communities across the country that achieved great results. However, I quickly learned that these programs, even the ones in the same community, were not aligned with each other or other services in the community. I would meet with community leaders and executives of community organizations who recognized the fragmentation and conceded that better coordination would result in more effective services and better stewardship of the scarce resources. It became clear that a clearinghouse for collaboration, consolidation, communication, lessons learned and innovative practices was necessary to help advance a holistic approach centered on education, meaningful employment and access to health care. I co-founded the Center for Military and Veterans Community Services to facilitate this community alignment, coordination and consolidation of new and existing community services. I named the center after a career soldier I served with in Iraq, Staff Sergeant Donnie D. Dixon, who was killed during his second tour of duty in Iraq. Between my work as a direct report to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the Dixon Center launch in May 2012 my team and I have worked with over 550 communities and cultivated a network of 20,000 organizations and like-minded individuals through community convening sessions, one-on-one consultations and direct collaborations, partnerships and consolidations of networks. This provides an understanding of grass roots solutions that are working or not working.

Dixon Center is sponsored by Easter Seals that leads through highly interconnected and synergistic strategic and tactical approaches to advance a shared mission and vision. Dixon Center and Easter Seals jointly invest in and leverage their partnership for immediate and long-term mission impact benefiting servicemembers and Veterans, their families and the families of the fallen; and all those stakeholders, influencers, and decisionmakers that have a role in supporting the military and Easter Seals is a leading provider of services to individuals with disabilities and other special needs and their families, providing high-quality direct services and supports through a national network of community-based facilities that leverage and enhance local delivery systems and truly make a positive difference in the lives of Veterans and their families. The two organizations are integrated and collaborative, yet also distinct and intentionally independent to best achieve optimal results. The partnership has proven to be effective and complimentary as Dixon Cen-

ter focuses on improving the delivery to services while Easter Seals specializes in the delivery of services to veterans and military families. However, I want to emphasize that my testimony here today reflects my views and those of Dixon Center alone.

Dixon Center, and the communities and organizations we work with, recognizes that no single agency or organization has the manpower, resources or intellectual capital to fully assist our veterans and military families. The Center has provided leadership, advice, training and recommendations to help communities develop linkages and coordinate or consolidate services so that veterans and military families have easier, more effective access to community resources and supports. Each community must undertake its own planning process and develop its own coordination and consolidation models. However, we have found common elements in successful communities. They include: starting Veterans Treatment Courts; building veteran and military family awareness initiatives; providing affordable housing; increasing access to legal services; expanding veteran job training partnerships with businesses; organizing student veteran coordinators at colleges and universities; and developing veteran community action teams.

However, the most important first steps a community should carry out are to:

1. *Engage in Community Asset Mapping.* Without coordination and consolidation of resources and service delivery, communities and its military and veterans' organizations are simply creating another maze of bureaucracy and confusion for the veterans to ignore and feel another level of disconnection. Each community must undergo the hard work of identifying all of the community resources, organizations and programs aimed at helping veterans and military families to create a single community profile and to foster linkages and potential consolidation of existing community assets. To assist communities in this process, Points of Light, an international non-profit founded by President George H.W. Bush, hosts The Community Blueprint, a set of tools and practices that provides communities with the framework and process for consolidating and coordinating local efforts to produce positive, measurable outcomes for veterans, military members and their families.

2. *Develop and Promote Community Rally Points.* In combat, a rally point is a key, recognizable location to fall back on should an operational mission be disrupted or threatened. Each community should identify a specific, physical location that enables a veteran to access information and assistance on issues pertaining to health care, employment, education, housing, financial and legal problems, and strategies for accessing VA services.

*Policy Recommendation:*

Congress should, through both authorization and appropriations language, direct the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs to fund Community Asset Mapping and Community Rally Points within new authority and funding or as part of existing VA-community grant programs.

PROMOTE VA-COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS THROUGH POLICIES

A 2012 report (Well After Service: Veteran Reintegration and American Communities) argued that Federal agencies have "insufficient reach into the communities from which veterans come and to which they return" and recommended a comprehensive reintegration strategy focused on veterans wellness that leverages the reach and resources of community-based organizations. Hundreds of communities and thousands of community-based organizations are prepared to assist the VA as it supports the 22 million living veterans and the one million additional men and women expected to transition to civilian life over the next five years. Public-private partnerships can be powerful. However, VA policy and procedures make it difficult for qualified new and well-established community organizations to partner with the VA to assist in this daunting service and capacity challenge.

Through executive order, statute and its own initiatives (i.e.: NGO Gateway), the VA has recognized the need to work with community-based partners to complement and expand their services, particularly in parts of the country where the VA does not have a physical presence. In addition, Congress has taken significant action recently to help foster public-private partnership at the VA through the creation of grant programs (i.e.: Supportive Services for Veterans Families) or pilot programs to ensure veterans and military families have timely access to local and effective services. However, the process to partner with the VA on the local and national level is confusing, inconsistent, bureaucratic, ineffective and frustrating. For example, certain program opportunities are coordinated and decided at the headquarter level while others are seemingly available through the regional or local center. There is no uniform way for organizations to partner with the VA or guidance to

effectively communicate with decisionmakers. In addition, certain opportunities are closed to select business or organizational criteria. While I understand and fully support priority preference to promote the use of veteran-owned and service-disabled veteran-owned businesses, most veteran organizations are led by or operated by U.S. veterans and should, at the very least, have an opportunity to compete for those programs or contracts. Finally, the VA must expand its current community partnership agenda, which mostly includes holding semi-regular NGO/nonprofit meetings and signing memorandum of understandings, to include meaningful partnerships that include financially reimbursing organizations for the quality, effective services the VA expects of these organizations.

*Policy Recommendations:*

- Congress should expand public-private partnerships by developing new programs or new requirements within existing programs that direct the VA and other Federal agencies to partner with and provide access by community-based organization, including qualified new and well-established nonprofit or nongovernmental organizations (NGO's), to leverage existing community infrastructure.
- Congress should require that the VA establish annual prime and subcontracting goals specific for NGO's and nonprofits to promote community partnerships.
- Congress should direct the VA to establish a preferred community partner list of fully vetted organizations for each of its service lines so that, in cases of emergency or service capacity limitations, the VA can easily refer program eligible veterans to qualified community organizations for services without delay and bureaucratic red tape.

CONCLUSION

America's veterans are not receiving the compassionate outreach, care and services they need to transition successfully from military to civilian life. This is not for lack of interest or desire from America's communities or local organizations. I have seen community after community and organization after organization stand up to help take on this great responsibility. Congress must do everything it can to ensure that Federal agencies make decisions in the best interest of veterans, military servicemembers, their families and the families of the fallen and not what is in the best interest of their own agency and their program and service turf. In addition, Congress should expect the VA and other Federal agencies to develop structured community outreach plans and report on meaningful partnerships that have developed as a result of their plans.

Mr. Chairman, I was pleased you gave today's hearing and its theme of partnership with the community some urgency by referencing it as a "Call to Action." The brave men and women who have fought for our country deserve nothing less than effective and immediate action. Through Dixon Center, we are stepping up community activity and action through corporate and foundation gifts to facilitate services to veterans and military families living in Indiana (Indianapolis), Maryland, Minnesota (St. Cloud), New Jersey, New York (Syracuse), Ohio (Cincinnati), Oregon (Salem), and Virginia. I pledge to continue this collaborative work in states and communities across the United States. I also urge this Committee to continue its leadership in this area and compel the VA and other Federal agencies to expand meaningful community-based outreach and partnerships to ensure veterans and returning servicemembers, like Mervin Roxas, get the assistance they need during transition to thrive and grow in their communities. Thank you for the opportunity to share with you my update.

PREPARED STATEMENT OF MATTHEW E. MELMED, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, ZERO TO THREE: NATIONAL CENTER FOR INFANTS, TODDLERS, AND FAMILIES



National Center for Infants, Toddlers, and Families

**STATEMENT FOR THE RECORD OF  
MATTHEW E. MELMED, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR  
ZERO TO THREE: NATIONAL CENTER FOR INFANTS, TODDLERS, AND FAMILIES**

**SUBMITTED TO THE U.S. SENATE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS**

**HEARING ON A CALL TO ACTION: VA OUTREACH AND COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS**

**April 24, 2013**

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee:

I am pleased to submit the following written testimony to the Committee on Veterans' Affairs on behalf of ZERO TO THREE, National Center for Infants, Toddlers, and Families. My name is Matthew Melmed, and I am the Executive Director of ZERO TO THREE, a national non-profit organization that has worked to advance the healthy development of America's infants and toddlers for over 30 years. I would like to start by thanking the Committee for holding this hearing examining the outreach strategy for meeting the needs of Veterans and their families. I want to urge your attention to, and your action on behalf of, an important group of which you may not previously have thought as coming within the purview of this Committee: infants and toddlers in Veteran families.

Military families have been experiencing multiple and extended deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan for over a decade. In spite of the recent withdrawal from Iraq and Afghanistan, deployment and separation remain core components of the military lifestyle. We know that many Service members are young, with young families that feel the impact of separation and loss. Many of these Service members are returning home with physical injuries, as well as cognitive and psychological issues, including traumatic brain injury, depression, traumatic stress responses, and substance abuse.

Given these factors, it is increasingly important to think about the effects of Veterans' experiences on their young children, and how the communities to which they return respond. The early years are a time of tremendous growth and development. Infants and toddlers require attuned, responsive caregiving to stay on their optimal developmental trajectories. Chronic or severe parental distress may increase risk for compromised family and child outcomes (Maughan, Cicchetti, Toth, & Rogosch, 2007; Schechter et al., 2004; Schwerdtfeger & Goff, 2007), warranting a need to carefully examine and respond to Veteran families and their young children potentially affected by service-related trauma, injury, or loss.

While data on the numbers and ages of children of Veterans is extremely limited, it is estimated that 30% of all Veterans have children (Westat, 2010). Emerging data from a regional report suggests that, in the state of Illinois, nearly one out of five Veterans has one or more children under the age of 5 in their household. For female Veterans, that number rises to nearly one out of four with a child age 0 to 5 (Carrow, Rynell, & Tepstra, 2012). Approximately one quarter of Illinois' new Veterans with children are single parents, with almost half of Veteran mothers parenting alone (Carrow et al., 2012). The scale and rates of mental health problems such as depression, anxiety and PTSD have been found to be more than twice as high among pregnant women Veterans compared to non-pregnant women Veterans. (Mattocks, et al, 2009). According to the DVA (2011), Veteran men are twice as likely to become homeless as non-Veteran men. Veteran women are three times more likely to become homeless than non-Veteran women. For female Veterans, risk for homelessness is highest between the ages of 18-29—potentially overlapping with early parenting.

Women are the fastest growing group within the Veteran population, representing 11.6% of Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF)/Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) veterans (DVA, 2013). For female Veterans who are expectant or new mothers, the tasks of parenting their infants may be overlaid with complicating factors associated with military sexual trauma (DVA, 2013), psychological health issues (DVA, 2013), unemployment (U.S. Department of Labor, 2012), and homelessness (DVA, 2011). A 2011 study by the California Research Bureau indicated that “transitioning to civilian life and help with family life and family services were key non-healthcare needs at time of transition for all women veterans in all eras of service.” (Blanton, 2011, p. 2)

Veteran parental stress may be further exacerbated by the loss of subsidized childcare typically made available to active duty families through the Office of Family Policy, Office of Secretary of Defense (OSD). The need for affordable, high quality childcare, combined with both financial and psychological stressors, makes the role of civilian, community-based professionals even more critical to the health and well-being of Veteran expectant mothers, new parents, and their young children.

For a number of years, ZERO TO THREE has worked with the Department of Defense, through our Coming Together Around Military Families™ project, to help military installations ensure that service providers for young children and families understand and are prepared to address the effects of deployment, as well as trauma, grief, and loss, on the many young children whose parents have been deployed. With so many young Service members coming home to civilian life, with many either returning to young families or likely to start them, we have begun to think through how the communities that receive them can develop the connections and support these families need. We have launched Coming Together Around Veterans' Families™, for activities such as a free training for interdisciplinary professionals serving families in Los Angeles. With private funding, we are exploring ways to adapt our materials developed for military families with young children to the needs of Veterans' families. One of our new resources is a children's book, *Sparrow*, designed to support a young child whose parent/caregiver has been injured, physically or emotionally, while on deployment. We also examined the perceptions of professionals in the Chicago area about the services available to Veterans' families with very young children and gaps that exist in those services.

Unlike the military, which has more responsibility for responding to the needs of the entire family, the VA historically has had responsibility in general only for the returning Veteran. While there has been much attention to the impact of PTSD and TBI on returning military Service members, health and mental health services provided by DVA are designed primarily for the Veterans themselves. Despite a growing body of research that shows how a Veteran's social network supports a successful transition to civilian life, VA mental health services have only recently begun to include Veterans' spouses. Current services do not consider the needs of all family members. It will be the communities where these Veterans and their families live that will need to respond in a coordinated way to the issues these families may be facing.

As more troops gradually transition into the larger community, it is essential that civilian early childhood professionals, as well as professionals at the Department of Veterans' Affairs (DVA), have the information and resources to be fully responsive to Veteran parents' unique and evolving needs and to be aware of how early development of young children can be affected by the condition of the parent. In addition, methods of data collection must be improved so that the numbers and ages of children of Veterans are captured on a national scale. In order to develop and implement systems of care that are optimally responsive to children of Veterans who have transitioned out of the service, the scale of the need must be fully identified and understood (Children and Family Futures, 2013).

In conclusion, I appreciate the opportunity to provide input to the Committee as it strives to ensure awareness and access of the VA benefits and services earned by Veterans and their families through coordinated and integrated outreach efforts. In order to ensure the best outcomes for Veteran families with infants and toddlers, it is crucial that communities, as well as policymakers in Congress and at the DVA, carefully examine and respond to their needs. We can and must improve the outreach to this population and ensure that we are effective in informing Veteran families on the full range of services available—and in making sure those services are coordinated and accessible. We *can* make a difference in the lives of these children and families *if* we act now to ensure that what we know from the science of early childhood development guides what we do for these very vulnerable babies and their families.

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