

## STATEMENT OF MARK JOHNSTON

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Committee on Appropriations  
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Housing Our Heroes, Addressing the Issue of Homeless Veterans in America

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## **Introduction**

Chairwoman Murray, Chairman Johnson, Ranking members, I am pleased to be here today to represent the Department of Housing and Urban Development. My name is Mark Johnston and I oversee the Department's efforts to confront the housing and service needs of homeless persons. This effort includes addressing the needs of one of our most vulnerable populations – homeless veterans and their families. It is a tragedy that some of those who risked their lives for each of us now sleep on the streets of this great nation. These veterans may be homeless due to physical or mental disability, or economic distress. HUD provides housing and services to homeless veterans through HUD's targeted programs for special needs populations, as well as through other mainstream HUD resources.

The Department administers a variety of housing programs that can assist veterans. These include the Housing Choice Voucher Program, Public Housing, HOME Investment Partnerships, and the Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) program. These programs, by statute, provide great flexibility so that communities can use these federal resources to meet their particular local needs, including the needs of their veterans. In addition to these programs, Congress has authorized a variety of targeted programs for special needs populations, including homeless persons.

Unfortunately, veterans are too often represented in the homeless population. HUD is committed to serving homeless veterans and recognizes that Congress charges HUD to serve all homeless groups. HUD's homeless assistance programs serve single individuals as well as families with children. Our programs serve persons who are impaired by substance abuse, mental illness and physical disabilities as well as non-disabled persons. HUD provides an array of housing and supportive services to all homeless groups, including homeless veterans. I would like to take a moment to outline our activities that specifically relate to serving homeless veterans.

## **Targeted HUD Homeless Grant Assistance**

In December of 2007, HUD competitively awarded a total of nearly \$1.3 billion in targeted homeless assistance. A record 5,911 projects, up from 5,288 in FY 2006, received awards. It is important to note that veterans are eligible for all of our homeless assistance programs and HUD emphasizes the importance of serving veterans in our Continuum of Care (CoC) Homeless Assistance programs grant application. A total of 154 applications were submitted in 2007 that stated that at least seventy percent (70%) of their proposed clients would be veterans. Of that number, we awarded funds to 149 projects, which represents ninety-seven (97%) percent of the veteran-specific projects submitted. We awarded just over \$31.67 million to these targeted projects. In addition, we awarded over \$698.4 million to 2,674 projects where at least 10% of those to be served will be homeless veterans. When you combine all projects that will be serving veterans – targeted and non-targeted – we awarded a total of 2,823 projects for over \$730.07 million in 2007. HUD has been tracking the funding of veteran specific projects for the past decade. Much progress in serving this population has been made. In 1998, 36 projects that primarily serve veterans received funding through the annual CoC competition,

compared to 149 projects in 2007. As the overall CoC competition grew in the number of projects both submitted and funded, HUD was able to increasingly fund projects to assist our nation's homeless veterans.

To underscore our continued commitment to serve homeless veterans, we have highlighted veterans in our annual planning and grant application process. Approximately \$1.3 billion is available in the 2008 Continuum of Care homeless grants competition. In the grant application we encourage organizations that represent homeless veterans to be at the planning table. Because of this Departmental emphasis, over 90 percent of all communities nationwide have active homeless veteran representation. We also require that communities identify the number of homeless persons who are veterans so that each community can more effectively address their needs. To that end, in collaboration with the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), we also strongly encourage that communities use VA's CHALENG or Community Homelessness Assessment, Local Education and Networking Groups data in assessing the needs of their homeless veterans when preparing their HUD grant application.

### **Interagency Initiatives**

The Administration's goal to end chronic homelessness is helping to meet the needs of homeless veterans. Because the chronically homeless face many challenges, it is imperative to involve many partners. HUD, VA, the Department of Health and Human Services, the Department of Labor and the other agencies that make up the U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness (ICH) have worked to achieve this goal at the federal level. With a sustained effort since 2002, we are starting to see results. HUD just recently announced, in our Second Annual Homeless Assessment Report to Congress, published in March 2008, an 11.5 percent reduction in chronic homelessness nationwide between 2005 and 2006. This is the first time since the federal homelessness programs were created through the McKinney-Vento Act in 1987 that this country has seen a reduction in homelessness of any kind. We anticipate having the chronic homeless figure for 2007 by June and expect to see an even further reduction.

I represent HUD on VA Secretary Peake's Advisory Committee on Homeless Veterans. This important advisory group has specifically addressed chronic homelessness among veterans. Additionally, there are a number of initiatives that HUD has been involved in that focus on ending chronic homelessness in this country. I'd like to highlight several of them.

The first is a joint initiative among three federal departments of the US Interagency Council on Homelessness--HUD, VA, HHS. Called the Collaborative Initiative to Help End Chronic Homelessness, this was the first demonstration program to specifically focus on chronically homeless persons. HUD contributed \$20 million of the initial \$35 million awarded. HUD's funds provided the housing needed by this population. VA and HHS provided the needed supportive services to help persons stabilize their lives. Hundreds of people, including veterans, who formerly called the streets their home, are now living in stable housing and taking advantage of substance abuse treatment and other needed services. HUD has also provided almost \$4.9 million in renewal funding through HUD's annual Continuum of Care competition for continued housing assistance for this special initiative. A preliminary evaluation report from VA through the Northeast Program Evaluation Center (NEPEC) shows that over 1,200

chronically homeless persons have received housing and services at these 11 sites. Furthermore, thirty percent (30%) of the evaluation participants for this initiative were chronically homeless veterans.

HUD and the Department of Labor joined forces and awarded \$13.5 million to five grantees nationwide to provide permanent supportive housing and employment assistance to chronically homeless persons, including veterans. The local partners provided additional needed services such as health care, education, and life skills. We believe that the combination of housing and jobs has helped chronically homeless persons change their lives and become more self-sufficient. HUD has provided \$1.47 million in subsequent renewal funding through HUD's annual Continuum of Care competition for continued housing assistance to these grantees. Over 400 chronically homeless individuals have been provided with housing and services, of whom approximately fifteen (15%) percent are chronically homeless veterans.

HUD also developed, in consultation with the Interagency Council on Homelessness, a third initiative to assist chronically homeless persons with a long-term addiction to alcohol. Called the Housing for People who are Homeless and Addicted to Alcohol (HHAA) initiative, HUD provided \$10 million in initial funding to twelve programs in eleven cities. Subsequently, HUD has awarded approximately \$4.66 million in additional funding through HUD's annual Continuum of Care competition to sustain this effort. HUD provided funding for permanent housing and the community partners provided needed supportive services for these chronically inebriated individuals. This initiative is serving approximately 550 persons with permanent supportive housing, of whom approximately twenty-one (21) percent are veterans.

HUD regularly works with other federal program partners to address the needs of homeless persons, including homeless veterans. For example, this past August, HUD participated in the Department of Labor's DOL-VETS Grantees Training Conference held in Denver, Colorado. HUD was able to provide information on our homeless funding process to over 300 DOL grantees who received awards to help veterans overcome employment barriers.

### **VA Stand Down**

In January 2008, HUD participated in VA's Stand Down at the Washington, DC VA Medical Center. Unique to this event was a pilot HUD/EITC program – Earned Income Tax Credit counseling for homeless veterans. HUD and the IRS partnered to reach out to homeless veterans at the Stand Down. As a result of this pilot, of the 256 total taxpayers at the event, 41 tax returns were prepared. The largest refund was \$1,117, and the average refund was \$351. Based on this initial success, VA and the IRS are looking to expand the initiative to other Stand Downs around the country.

### **HUD's Homelessness Resource Exchange**

The new Homelessness Resource Exchange (located at [www.HUDHRE.info](http://www.HUDHRE.info)) is HUD's one-stop shop for information and resources for people and organizations who want to help persons who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless. It provides an overview of HUD

homeless and mainstream housing programs, our national homeless assistance competition, technical assistance information, and more.

The HUDHRE has a number of materials that address homeless veterans' issues. For example, HUD dedicated approximately \$350,000 to enhance the capacity of organizations that do or want to specifically focus on serving homeless veterans, update existing technical assistance materials, and coordinate with VA's homeless planning networks. As a result, we developed two technical assistance guidebooks. The first guidebook, *Coordinating Resources and Developing Strategies to Address the Needs of Homeless Veterans*, describes programs serving veterans that are effectively coordinating HUD homeless funding with other resources. The second guidebook, *A Place at the Table: Homeless Veterans and Local Homeless Assistance Planning Networks*, describes the successful participation of ten veterans' organizations in their local Continuums of Care. Additionally, we have held national conference calls and workshops to provide training and assistance to organizations that are serving, or planning to serve, homeless veterans. All of this information is available on the HUDHRE website.

### **HUD-VASH and Targeted Homeless Funding**

With the initiative and action of these Committees and the support of the Administration, HUD is starting to roll out the HUD-Veterans Affairs Supportive Housing Program, called HUD-VASH. The 2008 Consolidated Appropriations Act (Public Law 110-161), enacted December 26, 2007, provided \$75 million for HUD-VASH vouchers for 2008 funding. The HUD-VASH program combines HUD Housing Choice Voucher rental assistance (administered through HUD's Office of Public and Indian Housing through local Public Housing Agencies) for homeless veterans, with case management and clinical services provided by VA at its medical centers in the community. Through this partnership, HUD and VA expect to provide permanent housing and services to approximately 10,000 homeless veterans and their family members, including veterans who have become homeless after serving in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The President has requested \$75 million for FY 2009 for HUD-VASH. This will provide approximately 10,000 additional vouchers to those being awarded this year. HUD-VASH will make a significant impact on those who bravely served this great nation and who have returned to live on our streets and in our emergency shelters. In addition to requesting funding for HUD-VASH in 2009, the Administration has again requested record-level funding for HUD's homeless assistance grants programs to better serve veterans and others who become homeless. The FY2009 requested level, including HUD-VASH, is \$1.711 billion, which is a 56% increase over the \$1.1 billion targeted homeless funding appropriated in 2001.

### **Other HUD Veterans Initiatives**

The opportunities to focus on issues involving homeless veterans extend beyond the federal agencies. For instance, HUD regularly works with the National Coalition for Homeless Veterans and actively participates in their conferences. These opportunities to work with organizations at all levels are very helpful as we continue to make progress in serving homeless veterans.

To coordinate veterans' efforts within HUD, to reach out to veterans organizations, and to help individual veterans, HUD established the HUD Veterans Resource Center. The Center has a 1-800 number to take calls from veterans and to help address their individual needs. The Center takes well over one thousand calls each year. The Resource Center works with each veteran to connect them to resources in their own community. Finally, the Center also provides information within the Department and with other agencies and veterans organizations to better address the needs of veterans.

### **Conclusion**

Again, I want to reiterate my and HUD's desire and commitment to help our veterans, including those who are homeless. We will continue to work with our federal, state and local partners to do so. I will be glad to address any questions you may have.