

Prepared Statement of Caesar Hill, Veteran, United States Navy, and Community Affairs Manager, Catholic Charities of the Archdiocese of Chicago, Chicago Illinois

Chairwoman Biggert, Ranking Member Gutierrez, and Members of the Committee. I am Caesar Hill, and I am here to appeal to you to intensify and support all programs and services for the betterment of my fellow veterans, especially those of housing. In 2010, VA Secretary Shinseki set bold goals for his department in addressing homelessness among veterans, pledging to reduce the number of homeless veterans from 131,000 in 2008 to 59,000 in 2012.

Hand in hand with housing is a need for employment: The unemployment rate for veterans who served on active duty in the U.S. Armed Forces at any time since September 2001—a group referred to as Gulf War-era II veterans—was 12.1 percent in 2011, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. There is also a need to examine service-connected disability benefits.

I do not believe that this asking too much, but appealing for that which is decent, and deserved.

All my life, I have performed the “American way,” a loving, caring, encouraging and supportive family, a college graduate with substantial professional employment before my enlistment into the United States Navy starting in 1977, as well as after receiving a Naval commission in the United States until 1983. I returned to Chicago and eventually received an appointment under then Mayor Harold Washington as District Manager for the Chicago Department of Human Services, until the Mayor’s death in 1987. There followed a series of hirings and layoffs, always related to program cuts or budgetary constraints. In 2004 I faced a system-wide layoff, could not bridge the gap, and I eventually became homeless. Despite this circumstance, I recalled two of my family’s strongest rules: Rule #1 – Never give up, and Rule # 2 – Always remember rule number one. This is why my dream is to complete the MBA program in which I am currently enrolled.

I stayed in the Lincoln Park Community Shelter for 18 months. The shelter’s challenging and rigorous programming calls for accountability of guests in accomplishing short and long term goals towards economic stability and permanent affordable housing. Although I became a substitute teacher while there, I was unable to move into affordable, permanent housing because this was not permanent employment.

I departed there for St. Leo Campus for Veterans; the first of its type, large-scale, single-population residence for homeless veterans. The housing stability, along with the supportive programs and services provided there, and made possible through the Catholic Charities of the Archdiocese of Chicago, brings about camaraderie of veterans from all branches of the military services, and much needed healing, rest and respite, and stabilization. Other elements include:

- Case management services
- Programs addressing the challenges of substance abuse, physical/mental health issues
- Supportive employment (e.g. Veterans Employment Program)
- Enterprise development (e.g. Veterans Painting Enterprise)
- Training and placement

I was hired on as the Community Liaison for Veterans Services, and in that capacity, working with the management team, was able to bring about an array of services including:

- Legal assistance services (e.g. Catholic Charities, John Marshall Law School Veterans Legal Clinic, Legal Assistance of Greater Metropolitan Chicago Veterans Project, Clerk of the Circuit Court, Illinois Prisoner Review, and Cabrini Green Legal Aid Foundation)
- Continuing education satellite (e.g. Roosevelt University Veterans Upward Bound Program)
- Lasting relations with community organizations and the Chicago Police Department (Three veterans were recipients of Chicago Hero Awards for their dedicated work with children through the community watch program, and the Community Alternative Policing Strategy (CAPS) organization.)
- Health fairs and seminars and community meetings
- Cultural, educational and social activities

The need for such programs and services are indicative of the awful conditions that homeless veterans face.

Service to veterans is nothing new for the Catholic Charities. The agency has worked with veterans starting right after WWI, and it remains on the frontline, gaining the high ground in the war on poverty. Veterans should not have to serve; whether fighting on foreign shores or otherwise, only to return home to face another war; this war on poverty. This war has casualties as any other war. It is not right.

The continued need exists for:

- More HUD/VASH Vouchers and the shortening of the processing system in order to cut down on long waiting periods
- Assurance of veteran hiring through the Department of Labor Office of Federal Contracts Compliance
- Housing provided through properties owned by the federal government
- Streamlining the process for determining service connected disability ratings and decrease disparity between states in amount of benefits payments (e.g. The Department of Veterans Affairs Office of Inspector General found that the annual average disability payment in Illinois is \$6,961 and in New Mexico \$12,004. The national average payment was \$8, 890)
- Determine civilian employment opportunities in relationship to military occupations through the Transitional Assistance Program (TAP) prior to disembarkation from the military.

I have moved on and am now Community Affairs Manager for Catholic Charities Community Development and Outreach Services. Still, I encounter veterans who need assistance and refer them to the many programs and services offered through Catholic Charities of the Archdiocese of Chicago as well as a wide range of other resources.

And in closing, I trust that you will make the concerns that I have broached a priority as we receive the tens of thousands of veterans returning from military duty.

Thank you very much for this opportunity to address you. God bless America!