

## **Prepared Statement of Eileen Higgins, Vice President, Housing Services, Catholic Charities of the Archdiocese of Chicago, Chicago Illinois**

Chairwoman Biggert, Ranking Member Gutierrez, and Members of the Committee: I am Eileen Higgins, and I am here representing Catholic Charities of the Archdiocese of Chicago where I am Vice President and in charge of Housing Services, including those programs serving homeless Veterans.

Catholic Charities of the Archdiocese of Chicago is the social service arm of the Catholic Church in Cook and Lake Counties, Illinois. The Agency is under the auspices of our local Catholic Bishop, Francis Cardinal George, O.M.I. We are also a member agency of Catholic Charities USA, and our Administrator is the Chair of Catholic Charities USA's Board Social Policy Committee.

Catholic Charities has a 95-year tradition of providing client-centered services through intensive case management for difficult-to-serve populations. The agency also delivers services tailored to meet individual client needs through a comprehensive network of collaborative partners in order to reduce redundancy and add value to the community served.

Persons without homes or on the brink of homelessness struggle with similar concerns: few affordable housing options, low-paying jobs, and lack of access to mental and physical health care and support. Veterans facing homelessness may have experienced many conflict-related injuries, both physical and psychological. Reentry to civilian life is often impeded, and the Veteran experiences a downward spiral into homelessness. Additionally, employment can be challenging, due to both the current economic climate as well as the need for training and transferable skills to enter the civilian workforce. Catholic Charities is committed to bringing out the best in each Veteran by providing wrap-around services to assist them in achieving self-sufficiency to the highest degree possible. We encourage decision-making, self-determination, creativity, and accountability. We provide the knowledge, tools, and techniques to empower our Veteran clients to make informed choices; strengthen their capacity to regain control of their lives; reinforce their ability to manage and adapt to change; and support Veteran clients as they rebuild their stability.

For nearly a decade, Catholic Charities has recognized that many of our clients needing emergency services were Veterans. Homeless and hungry Veterans dine at Catholic Charities' "evening suppers;" visit our emergency assistance centers for food, clothing, and shelter; access care through our substance abuse programs; and benefit from our case management and counseling programs. Catholic Charities also administers homelessness prevention call centers for both the City of Chicago and Suburban Cook County. We know how to reach Veterans, and we know how to empower persons to overcome homelessness.

### ***Recent, successful homeless and low-income Veterans housing initiatives***

One recent, successful homeless and low-income Veterans housing initiative is Catholic Charities' own St. Leo Campus. The Campus includes a 141-unit supportive housing residence for Veterans built by a collaborative effort of VA, State and local government and private funding, among which is the Illinois AMVETS Service Foundation. Development of the

Residence was part of a national pilot project made possible by the VA, who invited Catholic Charities to create transitional housing for Veterans under the Homeless Veterans Comprehensive Assistance Act. The majority of apartments are subsidized through the HUD VASH and Shelter Plus Care voucher programs. The campus also contains a Health and Education Building, which houses a VA outpatient clinic, a library and computer center, a resource and job training center that incorporates counseling and supportive services, and a Veterans' memorial garden. It is the only one of five locations selected for this national pilot project that was actually built.

Subsequent funding through the U.S. Department of Labor and the U.S. Small Business Administration has allowed us to expand the services to include a Veterans' employment and training program. There are many partners in the successful administration of this program as well, including everyone from local private employers to the local VA Health Administration and Council of Network Homeless Coordinators.

For more than five years, Agency representatives have participated in monthly gatherings with VA staff and Veteran services providers from VISN 12. These meetings allow for coordinated delivery of care and ongoing publicity for key programming. In fact, the key to the success of this program is the collaboration of so many partners in order to provide all of the wrap around services necessary to assist Veterans who have multiple barriers to housing and employment, including mental and physical disabilities, chronic health problems, behavioral health issues, criminal records and poor work histories. The Veterans in our care receive intensive case management and supportive services plus referral to partners for services to address their complex levels of need.

At a higher level, the HUD VASH voucher program is entirely key to assisting homeless Veterans, whatever their situation, because it provides funds for case management services associated with the housing. These intensive, personalized case management resources often make the difference between sustained stability and return to housing crisis

***Obstacles to federal agencies' collaboration to effectively administer housing and services for homeless and low-income Veterans***

There are certain obstacles to collaboration: Clearly defined roles and responsibilities, and the communication of these, among them. Early on we experienced a breakdown in communication among our federal partners when it came to a decision about who was coordinating the case management services, and found it necessary to take the lead in doing so. On paper this seemed to be a duplication of services. Catholic Charities own analysis of the situation led us to develop a system that played to every partners' strengths.

***Obstacles that homeless and low-income Veterans face in securing housing assistance and services from federal programs***

When a young man or woman goes into service, it is out of a sense of pride for their country, to support their education, or to open doors to a better future for themselves and their families. While their time of service is a rewarding experience and a step toward a promising future, many experience unfortunate and life-changing circumstances. As a result of their time in combat, soldiers may experience Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI), Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD),

severe medical problems and substance abuse. These factors contribute to problems among Veterans, such as mental illness, limited job skills, lack of adequate employment, unemployment, incarceration and even homelessness.

Our military represent some of the strongest men and women among us, but due to the nature of combat, they often come home physically damaged. From a simple broken bone to a life-altering illness, Veterans may return to American soil with a wide range of physical health problems. In addition to multiple health problems, many Veterans often struggle in their attempts to reenter the work force, and when they do, they have difficulty earning a living wage. Experiencing inconsistent and low-paying employment, combined with a significant lack of affordable housing, Veterans find homelessness a serious concern, and frequently a reality.

After selflessly serving our country, all homeless Veterans are entitled to comprehensive benefits. In some cases, it is simply a lack of information or inability to access existing resources that keep Veterans disconnected. Some of the obstacles homeless and low-income Veterans face in securing housing assistance and services relate to their sense of trust in the government agency providing the services. This is more prevalent among populations of older Veterans. Catholic Charities has been able to position itself as a trusted intermediary and has secured many existing benefits for our older, chronically homeless Veteran clients.

Outreach efforts to promote awareness about the nature and availability of VA benefits have begun and should continue to be widely promoted so that Veterans can more easily access the services they require and to which they are entitled. Service expansions would also provide Veterans with access to a wider range of programs in their communities, helping them achieve dignity and self sufficiency.

***Obstacles that non-profit entities and other service providers face in helping homeless and low-income Veterans secure housing assistance and services from federal programs***

The obstacles that non-profit entities and other service providers face in helping homeless and low-income Veterans secure housing assistance and services from federal programs are largely the problems of this present economic situation: there is not adequate supply to meet the demand. There are not enough vouchers or other monies available to meet the needs and there are not enough supportive services funded for Veterans to prevent them from becoming homeless in the first place. There are good programs in place; there is not enough funding to reach every Veteran in need.

Walking to self-sufficiency with a wounded Veteran can be a long process of rehabilitation and relationship requiring time, patience and determination to open doors allowing the Veteran to gain back their dignity. Ensuring Veteran programs meet the need of the individual Veteran and are not 'cookie cutter' programs can be a challenge.

***Suggestions for improvements to federal housing programs to better service homeless and low-income Veterans.***

- Continue to expand the creative outreach services that increase awareness about the nature and availability of all benefits from the VA.

- Continue to publicize and provide assistance to Veterans so that they can claim their rightful benefits and compensation based on service to their country.
- Explore different avenues to better explain benefits to Veterans, whether or not they had access to readjustment counseling.
- Expand initiatives to reduce the backlog of claims for benefits pending with the VA.
- Expand tax relief for Veterans; in partnership with the business community, create educational, apprenticeship and vocational training opportunities for Veterans with disabilities to enter or return to the work force.
- Commit to fully funding all portions of plans to end Veteran homelessness and provide funding for supportive services in permanent supportive housing.
- Fund creative solutions that recognize the intersection of employment, housing, and mental/physical health.
- Pursue further development of affordable housing for elderly and disabled Veterans.

***Thank you***

Thank you for the opportunity to testify before the Committee. I've told just a little of the story. On behalf of Catholic Charities of the Archdiocese of Chicago and the Veterans whom we are privileged to serve, we look forward to working with all of the Members of the Committee to support programs that incorporate these principles and address these issues. Programs and funding for Veterans, particularly homeless Veterans, have received bi-partisan support. The future of our Veterans is not a political party's issue. It's America's issue.

Thank you again for allowing me this time today.