

Veterans Upward Bound

Roosevelt University

430 South Michigan Ave. (GB 715)

Chicago, Illinois, 60605

September 13, 2012

Dear Honorable Members of the Congressional Subcommittee on Insurance, Housing and Community Opportunity:

As an educator serving low-income and homeless veterans through Veterans Upward Bound (VUB), a federal grant program, it has been my experience that homeless and low-income veterans housing initiatives have made a positive impact on veterans needing to gain stability in their lives. Although the VUB program is chartered by the U.S. Department of Education to assist veterans prepare for postsecondary education, it has been imperative for the veterans receiving free educational services from VUB to have a place they can call home prior to focusing their efforts on their academic and career goals. VUB has benefitted from working with several Homeless Veterans' Reintegration Programs (HVRP) grantees to which we refer our clients in need of a roof over their heads. Meanwhile, the HVRP grantees have been able to refer clients to us once they have addressed the more pressing issue of housing.

The learning curve for service providers, like me, includes becoming aware of which veterans can be served according to the specific guidelines of a HVRP grant. For example, does the facility work only with single veterans, or does it also accept veterans and their families? Having knowledge of how long a veteran must be on a waiting list, or even simply identifying the appropriate point of contact can help facilitate the connection between the veteran and the HVRP. Other concerns include being cognizant of the differences between emergency, transitional, and long-term housing options.

As someone looking at the situation from the outside, it is rather apparent that veterans do not necessarily know the protocol for getting a referral, or even understanding the process by which one should be added to a housing wait list. Unless the veteran is directly engaged with the local VA hospital, or connected to a community or not-for-profit organization that serves as the veteran's liaison, it would be unlikely that he/she would even be aware of the HVRP resources available to him/her. In many cases, the veteran is simultaneously dealing with other personal life struggles such as lack of employment, inability to provide for his/her family, substance addiction, and need for mental health services. The continuum of services needed to be rendered is multifaceted, but the most vital and fundamental issue is being able to find shelter and food.

Additionally, I have become more aware that the service providers themselves are unsure of what other veteran service organizations do to help veterans. However, simple measures can be taken to better link agencies. Once HVRP grantees are announced, it would be beneficial for the list of organizations and the services they provide to be released to local Congressional offices, VA facilities, and other state and community organizations. A simple fact sheet detailing available resources, eligibility criteria, and contact information would help other service providers to make


appropriate referrals. Of course, it would be the responsibility of individual organizations to proactively meet, interact with these veterans service programs, while establishing parameters for a mutually beneficial referral system. For example, Veterans Upward Bound at Roosevelt University is able to refer its clients in need of housing to Volunteers of America of Illinois. Conversely, Volunteers of America is able to direct veterans who plan to pursue higher education to Veterans Upward Bound.

A final major concern is that new and robust federal educational benefits have helped propel low-income and homeless veterans, who are not adequately prepared for college, to enroll primarily for the purpose of gaining substantial income. It remains to be determined how effective new federal programs such as the Veterans Retraining Assistance Program (VRAP) will be in providing unemployed veterans with postsecondary education that leads to employment. At roughly \$1,500.00 per month, and assuming that a veteran will select a high-demand field requiring twelve months of funding, the nearly \$18,000.00 in supplemental income has sparked interest from low-income and homeless veterans to enroll in school.

Certainly, the opportunity to receive income while pursuing formal training is a tremendous motivator to consider postsecondary education; however, the unaddressed issue is whether those individuals are prepared for the academic rigors of college. It is also a major concern that prospective student veterans do not understand that the retroactive funding paid directly to them through the VRAP only begins after they are enrolled and participating in college courses. These individuals need someone to explain to them that they must procure other funding sources to pay for college classes prior to the start of the program. Meanwhile, these unemployed veterans are depending on monthly income from the VRAP to provide for basic necessities such as shelter, utilities, food, and transportation. They also need to be aware of the consequences of not paying their tuition on time, taking on too much educational debt, failing status impacting aid received, etc....

Clearly, the task of supporting veterans from a place of socio-economic distress to stability and onward to education leading to employment is of vital significance to our Nation. The more that federal departments (DOD, DOL, ED, and VA) can collaborate and coordinate reintegration and transition services, the better we can serve our veterans. Thank you for taking the time to review my statement.

Sincerely,



Dinu Skariah

VUB Counseling and Career Coordinator