

STATEMENT OF
CARL BLAKE, ASSOCIATE LEGISLATIVE DIRECTOR
PARALYZED VETERANS OF AMERICA
BEFORE THE
HOUSE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
CONCERNING H.R. 936,
THE "HEATHER FRENCH HENRY HOMELESS VETERANS
ASSISTANCE ACT" AND H.R. 2716,
THE "HOMELESS VETERANS ASSISTANCE ACT OF 2001"

SEPTEMBER 20, 2001

Chairman Smith, Ranking Member Evans, members of the Committee, the Paralyzed Veterans of America (PVA) is pleased to present our views on H.R. 936, the "Heather French Henry Homeless Veterans Assistance Act" and on H.R. 2716, the "Homeless Veterans Assistance Act of 2001." PVA would like to thank you, Mr. Chairman, for making this legislation a priority during such a trying time in our nation.

H.R. 936, the “Heather French Henry Homeless Veterans Assistance Act”

PVA supports H.R. 936, the “Heather French Henry Homeless Veterans Assistance Act” introduced by Representative Evans. There continues to be a problem with homelessness among our Nation’s veterans. The *Independent Budget*, which is co-authored by PVA, has estimated that more than 275,000 veterans are homeless on any given night. Furthermore, more than half a million veterans experience a period of homelessness throughout the course of a year.

Additional estimates show that one out of every three homeless males who is sleeping in a doorway, alley, or box in our cities and rural communities has put on a uniform and served this Nation. The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) reports that most homeless veterans are male; only two percent are female. More than 67 percent of these homeless veterans served in the Armed Forces for at least three years.

A major problem that the VA faces is that of homeless veterans with mental illness and substance abuse disorders. The VA estimates that about 45 percent of homeless veterans suffer from mental illness, and 50 percent have substance abuse problems. One of the most common illnesses among these individuals is Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). In the past five years, spending on the VA’s mental health programs has declined by nearly 10 percent. We previously testified before the Subcommittee on Benefits that the decline in the VA’s mental health capacity has increased the number of veterans with no place to go; thus, the rate of homelessness among veterans with mental illness continues to increase.

Support from various government agencies including the VA, the Department of Labor (DOL), and the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) is essential in overcoming the problems our homeless veterans constantly face. PVA supports the extension of the Homeless Veterans Reintegration Program (HVRP) of the Department of Labor. The HVRP has been the leading program for the employment of homeless veterans. Within the VA, physical and mental health care is vital to gain and hold employment. Mental health and substance abuse programs are key to preparing many homeless veterans for the workforce. PVA requests that each VA medical center report its current capacity in order to provide the VA with an idea of the direction we must go to improve.

PVA supports the establishment of the Advisory Committee on Homeless Veterans within the VA as outlined by Section 4 of H.R. 936. The interaction between the agencies represented on the committee should allow for multiple solutions to be developed and implemented. A critical task of this advisory committee is identifying barriers under existing laws and policies to effective coordination by the VA with other Federal agencies and with State and local agencies addressing homeless populations. Once the difficulties between the federal agencies are overcome, then a unified, focused effort can be made among these agencies to turn these problems around.

PVA also recognizes the need to assist homeless veterans with special needs. We must not let our women veterans, veterans over 50 years of age, veterans who have to care for

minor dependents or other family members, or veterans who suffer from substance abuse, PTSD, terminal illness, or chronic mental illness to be left behind.

The grant program for medical centers that would allow these centers to support those veterans with special needs is a vital part of meeting the national goal of overcoming homelessness among veterans within a decade. Evaluating veterans' satisfaction, health status, reduction in addiction severity, housing, and encouragement of productive activity and comparing results to similar programs in the VA will provide us with a blueprint of how to combat the homeless problem.

An important way to accomplish the national goal for overcoming veterans' homelessness is the implementation of outreach programs. It is no secret that non-homeless veterans filing claims face many difficulties because they are not fully aware of the benefits and services they are entitled to. That being said, if these individuals do not have easy access to everything they need to know, then you can only imagine how difficult it is for homeless veterans who have no link to information. Our homeless veterans need to know what benefits they are entitled to as well as what local VA facilities they have access to. We urge the VA to focus on outreach if it intends to be successful in overcoming the plight of homelessness.

H.R. 2716, the "Homeless Veterans Assistance Act of 2001"

PVA believes that the Homeless Providers Grant and Per Diem program outlined in Section 3 of the bill is an important part of overcoming homelessness among our nation's

veterans. The expansion, remodeling, or alteration of existing buildings, as well as the option for acquisition of facilities to be used as service centers or transitional housing is an essential element for the program. Likewise, allowing for the procurement of vans for outreach and transportation of homeless veterans is important to bringing the individuals into available programs.

PVA fully supports the authorization of funding for both the Grant and Per Diem program and the Homeless Veterans Reintegration Program, but we have some concerns with the numbers. First, we do not understand why the bill calls for authorizations for these two programs in both FY2000 and FY2001. Those fiscal years cannot be impacted by this legislation. PVA also supports the recommendations of the National Coalition for Homeless Veterans (NCHV) that the Grant and Per Diem program would need \$120 million to be effective. Although we appreciate the proposed increase outlined in the bill, if the Congress is truly determined to end homelessness among veterans, it will require more adequate funding to do so.

This same idea holds true with the Homeless Veterans Reintegration Program. Again, PVA appreciates the proposed increase in funding, but we support the recommendations of NCHV that \$50 million be appropriated to the program. This is virtually the only program that focuses on employment of veterans who are homeless. Since other resources that should be available to fund activities that result in gainful employment are not generally available, HVRP takes on an importance far beyond the small dollar amounts involved.

HVRP programs work with veterans who have special needs and are turned away by other programs and services. This effects veterans with long histories of substance abuse, severe PTSD, serious social problems, legal issues, and serious diseases or illnesses, such as HIV. These veterans require more devoted time, specialized treatment, intensive assessment, referrals, and counseling than is possible in other programs that work with other veterans seeking employment. The HVRP has suffered since its inception because it is small and easily overlooked. Even the Department of Labor rarely asks for the full appropriation for HVRP in the budget they submit to OMB.

HVRP is a very cost efficient program, with a cost per placement of about \$1500 per veteran entering employment. Authorizing \$50 million per year for the HVRP will assist veterans in becoming self-sustaining and responsible tax paying citizens. It is a harrowing thought that even by allowing for \$50 million in funding, we are only providing approximately \$100 for each of the over 500,000 veterans that are homeless at some point during the year.

PVA supports the proposed increases in rental assistance vouchers for HUD veterans' affairs supported housing programs as outlined by Section 4. These vouchers will go a long way towards helping homeless veterans who have chronic mental illness or chronic substance abuse disorders. The requirement for a veteran to agree to continued treatment for these disorders is essential in making these housing programs successful. It is

important to point out that the veterans should go through a VA transitional program to be eligible, not a community based transitional program.

We also support Section 9 of the bill that establishes a demonstration program relating to referral and counseling for veterans transitioning from certain institutions who are at risk of becoming homeless. The program will be important in providing counseling for job training and placement, housing, health care, and other available benefits to those veterans transitioning from an institution including a penal institution.

PVA salutes the efforts of this committee to bring the issue of homeless veterans to the forefront and to make every effort to put an end to it. We look forward to working with the committee and staff on solutions that will lead to the end of homelessness among veterans.

I thank the committee for this opportunity to present PVA's views and would be happy to answer any questions that you might have.

Information Required by Rule XI 2(g)(4) of the House of Representatives

Pursuant to Rule XI 2(g)(4) of the House of Representatives, the following information is provided regarding federal grants and contracts.

Fiscal Year 2001

Court of Appeals for Veterans Claims, administered by the Legal Services Corporation – National Veterans Legal Services Program – \$83,000 (estimated as of February 28, 2001).

Fiscal Year 2000

General Services Administration – Preparation and presentation of seminars regarding implementation of the Americans With Disabilities Act, 42 U.S.C. § 12101, and requirements of the Uniform Federal Accessibility Standards – \$30,000.

Federal Aviation Administration – Accessibility consultation – \$12,500.

Court of Appeals for Veterans Claims, administered by the Legal Services Corporation – National Veterans Legal Services Program – \$200,000.

Fiscal Year 1999

General Services Administration – Preparation and presentation of seminars regarding implementation of the Americans With Disabilities Act, 42 U.S.C. § 12101, and requirements of the Uniform Federal Accessibility Standards – \$30,000.

Court of Appeals for Veterans Claims, administered by the Legal Services Corporation – National Veterans Legal Services Program – \$240,000.

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Carl Blake is an Associate Legislative Director with the Paralyzed Veterans of America (PVA) at the PVA's National Office in Washington, D.C. He represents PVA to federal agencies including the Department of Defense, Department of Labor, Small Business Administration, and the Office of Personnel Management. In addition, he represents PVA on issues such as homeless veterans, disabled veterans' employment, and Gulf War Illness as well as coordinates issues with other Veterans Service Organizations.

He currently serves on the Subcommittee on Disabled Veterans (SODV), part of the Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP) and is a member of the Task Force for Veterans Entrepreneurship.

Carl is a native of Woodford, Virginia. He attended the United States Military Academy at West Point, New York. He received a Bachelor of Science Degree from the Military Academy in May 1998. He received the National Organization of the Ladies Auxiliary to the Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States Award for Excellence in Environmental Engineering Science.

Upon graduation from the Military Academy, he was commissioned as a Second Lieutenant in the United States Army. He was assigned to the 1st Brigade of the 82nd Airborne Division at Fort Bragg, North Carolina. Carl was retired from the military in October 2000 due to a service-connected disability.

Carl is a member of the Virginia-Mid-Atlantic chapter of the Paralyzed Veterans of America.

Carl and his wife Venus live in Fredericksburg, Virginia.