

**STATEMENT FOR THE RECORD**

**BY**

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**ASSOCIATE LEGISLATIVE DIRECTOR**

**PARALYZED VETERANS OF AMERICA TO THE**

**SUBCOMMITTEE ON HEALTH OF THE**

**HOUSE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS AFFAIRS**

**CONCERNING THE STATUS OF HOMELESS ASSISTANCE PROGRAMS**

**MAY 6, 2003**

Chairman Simmons, Ranking Member Rodriguez, members of the Subcommittee, Paralyzed Veterans of America (PVA) appreciates this opportunity to submit for the record concerning the status of homeless assistance programs for veterans conducted by the Department of Veterans Affairs, particularly its coordination with community-based providers and other agencies which is critical to the success of helping our homeless veterans.

PVA is the only national veterans' service organization, chartered by Congress to represent and advocate on behalf of our members and all Americans with spinal cord injury or disease. All of PVA's members, in each of the fifty states and Puerto Rico, are veterans with spinal cord injury or dysfunction. These veterans

suffer from catastrophic injury and disease and face challenges every day in their quest to survive and function fully in society. The effects of both physical and mental barriers to employment of veterans with catastrophic disabilities make these individuals very susceptible to becoming homeless.

America's veterans are unique members of society. In many cases they have faced challenges and witnessed horrors that non-serving members of society could never imagine. In many cases they have lost pace with their peers due to their service to this nation. Though military service offers training in many fields, some military occupations do not easily translate to the civilian workforce. This together with the need to jumpstart their lives when leaving the military puts many of our veterans in a precarious environment. In many cases, these veterans may become homeless for a short period. The difference between this temporary homelessness and a chronic problem is often due to early intervention programs. So far, these programs have not always lived up to our expectations.

Last September, PVA testified on P.L. 107-95, the Comprehensive Veterans Homeless Assistance Act of 2001. At that time, we indicated that federal agencies were off to a slow start. We stated that "it is understood that just as a great ship takes a period of time to begin moving, so federal programs may begin slowly." Unfortunately the ship has barely left the dock. While we do applaud efforts taken by Secretary Principi, such as the establishment of an advisory committee on homeless veterans, it appears the Department still has not decided

to aggressively attack the homeless veterans' problem. In government, often the signal of dedication to a program is the amount of funding provided. This Subcommittee and Congress have proven your commitment to our homeless veterans by consistently requesting funds for the VA budget for homeless programs. PVA's concern is why the Administration is not adequately requesting funding for these programs as well?

Successful homeless programs are provided at the local level. These community based approaches have been especially successful when they provide a continuum of care. Although these programs are very successful, they are also very expensive. The bulk of funding for these programs often comes from the Homeless Providers Grant and Per Diem Program. The level of funding for this program directly affects the number of homeless veterans that can be provided for. Though PVA understands the current challenges facing VA funding, it can not be overstated that these programs often provide the only hope for many of the most critically homeless veterans.

Additionally, the number of beds provided for the homeless are woefully inadequate, for veterans and non-veterans. Though recent funding provided an increase for new grantees, there was no funding to increase the number of beds or for the expansion of programs. Though the estimated number of homeless veterans on any given night has remained fairly constant, it has always been

many times greater than the safe housing available. Without a location to provide for these veterans, the opportunity to provide services is diminished.

PVA is also disappointed that it appears the VA is using a “smoke and mirrors” approach to make it appear that funding is increasing. Combining contract “per diem” with the Homeless Providers Grant and Per Diem Program makes it appear that VA is providing a greater amount of funds to this program. PVA does not believe this is true and in actuality, the resources provided to community programs have gone down. PVA would welcome an explanation from the Secretary that this is not so.

As stated above, PVA views employment as the means to end a veteran’s homelessness. Without employment, no individual or family can provide a home. The Department of Labor’s Homeless Veteran Reintegration Program (HVRP) managed through the Veterans Employment and Training Service (VETS) is a valuable program focusing on employment of homeless veterans. This program has been a great success.

The HVRP provides help for those veterans with the most significant problems from substance abuse, severe PTSD, serious social problems, legal issues and HIV. The specialized services needed for these veterans are often the only hope.

But in spite of the success of HVRP, it remains underfunded and more tragically, DOL does not even ask for the full appropriation in their budget submission. Again, funding indicates the support for a program. What does this say about the Department of Labor's support for our homeless veterans?

PVA fully supports the use of community providers to deliver the continuum of care that is the only successful way to provide for those who are homeless, especially the chronically homeless. But these programs can not deliver without adequate funding. We applaud the work that VA is doing to work with local providers, but more must be done. These local organizations are challenged by the multiple streams of funding they must pursue to meet the needs of the homeless. PVA hopes that the technical assistance allocation for community based homeless veteran providers will make it easier for these programs to acquire the funding to make available the much needed services to our homeless veterans.

The challenges facing our homeless veterans are incredible. It is impossible for many of us to even begin to understand what our most at risk veterans are going through. We can only try to do as much as we can to bring them back into normal society and help them become contributing members. We know the members of this Subcommittee are willing to provide this help. We would particularly like to recognize Mr. Evans for his introduction of H.R.1906, the "Servicemembers' Transition Assistance Program and Services Enhancement

Act of 2003". The bill's requirement to include homelessness risk awareness training during the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) is a "common sense" approach to protecting our newly discharged veterans. With VA reporting male veterans 1.3 times and female veterans 3.6 times more likely to become homeless than non-veterans, this small amount of preventative medicine may help some of our most valuable members of society avoid this terrible outcome.

Homelessness has no place in a nation as wealthy as America. PVA understands the many challenges facing the veterans' population. The scourge of substance abuse, PTSD, unemployment and HIV that faces many members of society is daunting. It can be overcome, but only with continued diligence on the part of homeless providers. This will be impossible without sufficient funding, and more importantly, continued efforts by the VA and oversight by this Subcommittee. We owe this to our veterans who have sacrificed so much for us all.

Mr. Chairman, Paralyzed Veterans of America appreciates this opportunity to express our views to the Subcommittee. Thank you.

## **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 2002**

Court of Appeals for Veterans Claims, administered by the Legal Services Corporation—National Veterans Legal Services Program—\$179,000 (estimated).

### **Fiscal Year 2001**

Court of Appeals for Veterans Claims, administered by the Legal Services Corporation—National Veterans Legal Services Program—\$242,000.

### **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.

## BIOGRAPHY OF BLAKE C. ORTNER

Blake Ortner is an Associate Legislative Director for Paralyzed Veterans of America representing PVA to federal agencies including the Department of Labor, Office of Personnel Management, Department of Defense, HUD and the VA. In addition, he is PVA's representative on issues such as Gulf War Illness, homeless veterans and coordinates issues with other Veteran Service Organizations. He also often serves on special projects such as disability advisor for the dedication ceremonies of the Korean War Veterans Memorial.

He has served as the Chair for the Subcommittee on Disabled Veterans (SODV) of the President's Committee on the Employment of People with Disabilities (PCEPD) and as a member of the Department of Labor's Advisory Committee on Veterans' Employment and Training (VETS) and the Veterans Organizations Homeless Council (VOHC).

A native of Moorhead, Minnesota, he attended the University of Minnesota in Minneapolis on an Army Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC) scholarship, graduating in 1983 with an International Relations degree. He was commissioned as a Regular Army Infantry second lieutenant stationed at Ft. Lewis, WA. Following service with the 9<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division, he became a member of the Army's Special Operations elite 2<sup>nd</sup> Ranger Battalion.

He continues his military service as the battalion commander of 3-116<sup>th</sup> IN, Virginia Army National Guard and returned in April 2002 from a 9-month deployment as part of the SFOR 10 peacekeeping mission to Bosnia-Herzegovina.

Mr. Ortner resides in Stafford, VA and is married with two children.