

Testimony for the New York City Council's Committee on Veterans

December 10, 2007

Council Member Monserrate, other members of the Committee on Veterans, and guests:

As a faculty member at LaGuardia Community College of the City University of New York (CUNY), I have worked closely with the Salvation Army's Borden Avenue Veterans Residence (BAVR) in Long Island City, Queens, since its inception in 1988. BAVR is the first veterans-only shelter established in the United States and I have served on the Community BAVR ^{Board + 2} ^{Committee} Advisory for more than 19 years. A year ago, on November 28, 2005, I testified before this Committee on "The Special Needs of Homeless Military Veterans" and two weeks ago, on November 19, I testified with ~~the~~ CUNY on the progress of the \$1 million NYC Council-funded Veterans Resource Centers, which is still struggling with a proposed \$¼ million cut from the CUNY Budget Office.

I am also a member of the Coalition of Veterans in Pain and Distress, is a group of veterans and veteran organizations working on behalf of the interest of all veterans. At the present time in New York

City, over 12,000 of the 35,000 homeless are United States military veterans. It is appalling and reprehensible that on a daily basis homeless veterans are encountered on the streets requesting "Food for Work." In light of the deplorable conditions veterans have faced after so many have made the ultimate sacrifice, giving up the comfort of their lives in past wars and today in Iraq and Afghanistan, it is imperative that veterans' issues, the care and respect they receive, become a priority to all City, State, and Federal agencies.

While I feel honored to be testifying at this hearing, I was very taken back by the topic of veterans' homelessness. I thought that the research, analysis and plans to end homelessness for NYC veterans were already in its implementation stages. At a December 2006 press conference held at BAVR, Mayor Bloomberg, US Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Secretary Jim Nicholson, and Department of Homeless Services (DHS) Commissioner Robert V. Hess announced a "Historic Agreement to End Homelessness For City Veterans." They convened a Task Force that was charged to produce a strategic plan to end veteran homelessness in New York City in 100 days. According to the press release, this Task Force "will develop long-term plans for new

joint VA-New York City street outreach teams, a new joint VA-New York City homeless intake center, and additional health care, mental health treatment and substance abuse treatment for eligible veterans.”

The Task Force will also “develop the protocols and standards for new joint outreach teams and the new homeless intake center that will be for the exclusive use of veterans.”

I recommend that your Committee hold Mayor Bloomberg and the Department of Homeless Services accountable for the Task Force’s strategic plans to end homelessness for New York City veterans. I would also like to add the following recommendations (which I made last year) - if they were not included in the Task Force’s report:

(1) Provide more financial, material, and holistic support for agencies serving homeless veterans including Borden Avenue Veterans Residence, Black Veterans for Social Justice, New Era Veterans, the Veterans SRO on 119th Street in Harlem, and the Jericho Veteran's Residence on 194th Street in the Bronx.

(2) Support legislation and policies for affordable housing for ALL veterans and their families - particularly single parents - and especially female veterans with children. This principle should be reflected in all housing initiatives through not-for-profit

organizations and Requests for Proposals (RFPs).

- (3) Develop interest free mortgages for housing for veterans.**
- (4) Advocate for one vending license for veterans and increase their areas of vending and number of vending licenses**
- (5) Support the recruitment of veterans as NYC Police and Fire Service and Transit Officers because of their discipline and ability to interact with people from diverse ethnicities and cultures., and**
- (6) Create a Public Assistance Center to serve veterans exclusively.**
- (7) Support the Community Board # 2 BAVR Advisory Committee in its role to monitor and assist the staff and veterans at BAVR**

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CITY COUNCIL HEARING
VETERANS COMMITTEE
TESTIMONY BY ROBERT V. HESS

Introduction

Good Afternoon Council Member Monserrate and members of the Committee. I am Robert Hess, Commissioner for the Department of Homeless Services. Thank you for providing me with an opportunity to testify before the committee. I am here today to give you an update on the City's efforts to address the issue of homelessness among veterans.

Before I go any further, I would like to first acknowledge my colleague, Commissioner Roger Newman. As you are aware, Roger was appointed to serve as the City's first Commissioner for the Office of Veterans' Affairs on August 7, 2007 by Mayor Michael Bloomberg. The appointment of Commissioner Newman is yet another example of this Administration's commitment to the men and women who have served this country.

Counting New Yorkers Living on the Streets

Each year since 2002, New York City has embarked on an extensive survey to estimate the number of individuals living on the streets and in other public spaces throughout the five boroughs through the Homeless Outreach Population Estimate or HOPE. The next count, HOPE 2008, will take place late in the evening of Monday, January 28, 2008. Our sixth annual street "count" will take place the same week as last year and employ the same HUD-recognized national standard for statistically valid methodologies to ensure accuracy and consistency. HOPE is critical in helping us evaluate the effectiveness of our current strategies to overcome street homelessness, as well as in developing appropriate housing resources for the most vulnerable New Yorkers currently living without shelter.

I know that there has been a great deal of interest from the City Council to utilize the HOPE survey as an opportunity to identify the number of veterans living on the streets. As we have discussed before, this is not the most accurate way to count or identify homeless veterans. The HOPE count is the national standard for identifying homeless people in part because of its single focus on counting those who are homeless living on the street regardless of whether they are awake or asleep. Researchers recognize that collecting information, such as Veteran status or Domestic Violence status during the street count would not only result in a severe undercount of these groups but also dilute the focus of getting an accurate count.

Recognizing the importance of the issue and the value of Council's request, I asked my staff to work with leading experts to create a tool that would allow us to gain a better understanding of the number of veterans living on the streets. I believe that we have come up with an excellent solution. I am very pleased to share that DHS has begun implementing a hand-held, wireless database application that our outreach providers will use, in part, to create a registry of street homeless individuals in New York City. Outreach teams are able to collect information about street homeless clients and use this information to more effectively assist them in transitioning into housing. One of the more important fields in the database is whether or not a client is a veteran. Because we are collecting information on the entire street homeless population, and not simply asking a sample of clients whether they are veterans on the night of the HOPE count, we will obtain more accurate data and be able to use the information to assist the clients more effectively. The implementation of this project is underway and by the spring of 2008 analyzed data reports on various categories, including the number of veterans, will be available, and will assist us in enhancing the services we provide.

Although our sophisticated hand-held technology system is in its infancy and we are just a short time away from the benefits of its full-scale use, we can share with you some informative data from a recent street homeless registry survey of the Manhattan street homeless population

conducted by the Center for Urban Community Services. Of the 1100 people surveyed during this study, 147 of the chronically street homeless clients and 46 of the non-chronic clients self-reported being veterans.

Creating a New System to Serve Homeless Veterans

The last time I testified before this committee, Mayor Bloomberg and then U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Secretary and United States Interagency Council on Homelessness Chair James Nicholson had recently announced the creation of the Operation Home Task Force. The Task Force was charged with the challenge of developing a strategic plan to end veteran homelessness in New York City. The guiding principle behind this initiative was that no one who had served and fought for this country should have to spend a night living on the streets or in shelter. A key element of Operation Home was an intense effort to house 100 veterans in 100 days. I am happy to report that the City not only exceeded this goal by housing 135 veterans during the first 100 days but since then we have moved 397 veterans from temporary shelter into permanent housing.

The Task Force was co-chaired by James Farsetta, the Director of the Veterans Integrated Services NY/NJ Network and me. Its members consisted of leaders in the government and the non-profit and housing sectors. In order to develop the strategic plan, the Task Force created five initial workgroups: Intake/Assessment; Safe Haven; Short-term Housing; Housing Placement; and Evaluation. The Steering Committee eventually created an additional workgroup focused on addressing legal, policy and funding issues of the new homeless veterans' services system.

The recommendations put forth by the Task Force will guide New York City in creating a new system focused on providing services and resources needed to effectively assist and house homeless veterans. Once implemented, this new system will serve as national model.

Borden Avenue

Recently, DHS achieved the first significant milestone that will move the City one step closer to the goal of providing permanent housing to veterans. On Tuesday, November 13, the Borden Avenue Veterans' Residence (BAVR) re-opened after undergoing extensive renovations. The facility, formerly housing 410 veterans nightly in a congregate setting, has been transformed into a short-term housing model that will house 243 men, and for the first time women, veterans in semi-private rooms. Every client will have a secured room that will include a bed, desk and chair, wardrobe closet, tack board and overhead lockable storage compartment, which gives them the opportunity to personalize their own space.

DHS' Facility and Maintenance Division expertly performed the work on BAVR, incorporating a community feeling into the facility by establishing color-coded "neighborhoods" and "streets" named after former recipients of the Medal of Honor. During the remodeling, which was completed in less than three months, the Salvation Army temporarily relocated BAVR clients and staff to DHS' 30th Street Shelter, where BAVR and DHS staff worked to place the majority of former BAVR residents into permanent housing.

I would like to now turn it over to Commissioner Newman who will provide you with an overview of the recommendations set forth by the Task Force.

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CITY COUNCIL HEARING
VETERANS COMMITTEE
TESTIMONY BY ROGER NEWMAN

Introduction

Good afternoon Council Member Monserrate and members of the Committee. As Commissioner Hess mentioned, my name is Roger Newman and I was recently appointed as the Commissioner for the Mayor's office of Veterans' Affairs (MOVA). I'm pleased to be here today and I want to take this opportunity to thank the City Council and the members of this committee for their continued commitment and dedication to addressing the issues impacting the lives of veterans, active service persons, and their family members.

Since 1987, MOVA, in partnership with the Department of Veterans' Affairs, The New York State Division of Veterans' Affairs, Veterans Organizations, City Agencies, and others, including this committee, has provided invaluable referral, advocacy, and support services to many thousands of veterans and active service members. My appointment serves as a reminder that there is more work to be done and that this Administration is committed to expanding the role of MOVA to develop programs and services focused on meeting the needs of our veterans.

To meet this challenge, MOVA must continue to grow and evolve. My office is taking steps to develop a comprehensive strategy, involving partnerships with other government agencies and non-profit organizations, to enhance access, coordination and delivery of health and human services to veterans, military personnel and their families throughout the City.

We are expanding the MOVA team by bringing on additional staff to begin coordinating social services for veterans, active service persons and family members. We are in the process of modernizing MOVA headquarters and fully expect it to be ready for occupancy by the first of the year. We are enhancing the coordination for interagency continuity concerning veteran related issues to ensure that both staff and clients receive appropriate services and benefits.

We've begun a partnership with the City Bar Association to provide free legal assistance to veterans having difficulty accessing benefits from the State and Federal governments. This service is available via a call to 311 or a referral from MOVA. Since this service began last month they've received numerous referrals.

We are also in discussions with CUNY to hold a multi-service fair for city agency veterans to take place in either May or June of next year. We have begun discussions with the State Division of Veterans' Affairs to partner with them in providing information to Veterans in the five boroughs to make them aware of the benefits available to them and their families.

I am also happy to report that MOVA is working with the VA and DHS to provide comprehensive services for homeless veterans. Much of what the City will be doing to address the needs of homeless veterans is being shaped by the work of the Task Force, which was mentioned by Commissioner Hess. I would like to take this opportunity to share with you some of the recommendations put forth by the Task Force and to provide you with an overview of how New York City will work to better serve homeless veterans.

Multi-Service Center

A main component of the new system is a Multi-Service Center (MSC) that will serve as a single point of access for homeless veterans and for those at-risk of becoming homeless. The Multi-Service Center is designed to provide comprehensive housing and social service needs assessment, and to link veterans to appropriate services and placement into permanent housing or

short-term housing facilities. The MSC will also make available preventive services needed to divert those veterans who are at risk of becoming homeless.

The MSC will be located at the current Project Torch in downtown Brooklyn. This location is familiar to many veterans and currently provides a wide range of services that will support the work of the MSC. The MSC will be open from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. Monday through Friday. On nights and weekends, homeless veterans requiring services will be eligible for special short-term beds or key-beds. The veterans will then return to the MSC to develop a service and housing plan.

Short-Term Housing

In addition to key-beds, the Task Force focused much attention on the issue of short-term housing. A chief goal of this new system is to create a continuum of care that will assist veterans with moving from the street to permanent housing. In doing this work, the Task Force also recognized that certain factors may impact the City's ability to move veterans directly into permanent housing, such as lengthy housing applications, waiting for move-in arrangements to be coordinated or the need for additional time to save money to pay for security deposits or the first months rent. These facilities will offer a structured and supportive environment that will engage veterans in need of services. These services will further ensure that they are prepared for independent living in the community.

One such facility will be operated by the Doe Fund. Recently, they were awarded a per diem grant from the Office of Veterans Affairs to operate a 138-bed short-term housing facility for homeless veterans. DHS will join the VA in funding this program. DHS will refer homeless veterans to this program for short-term housing and a vocational rehabilitation program based on the highly successful Ready, Willing and Able model pioneered by the DOE Fund. We anticipate that clients of the program will graduate to permanent apartments and that the clients will be economically self-sufficient, supporting themselves through employment income.

Safe-Haven

In December 2006, DHS created the first Safe Haven. The New York City Safe Haven model provides a low threshold, immediate housing alternative for chronic street homeless clients. It is unfortunate, but we know that there are certain individuals who choose to remain on the street rather than enter shelter. For them, traditional shelter simply does not work. There are those who feel that the system is too large or that there are too many rules to follow. In contrast, a Safe Haven is smaller in scale and has few barriers. Placement into these facilities improves the individual's standard of living and allows us to engage the client and increases the chances of getting them to accept an alternative housing option.

The Task Force also recommended the development of veteran- specific Safe Haven capacity as a point of entry for those living on the streets, since some homeless individuals, many of whom are veterans, do not avail themselves of traditional shelter, short-term housing or permanent housing. The Safe Haven beds will be prioritized for homeless veterans living on the street who historically have not accepted other placement options, including shelter. Street Outreach teams and the Veterans Affairs Medical Center for Homeless Programs will refer veterans to the Safe Haven. While at the facility, staff will engage veterans and create an environment where they are encouraged to work toward the goal of permanent housing. To meet this goal, services and resources will be made available to them and they can choose to access them at a pace that is comfortable for them. The desired length of stay will be three to six months.

Conclusion

This work of the Task Force has set forth an ambitious plan, but it is one that we must achieve. It is unacceptable that there are more than 700 veterans living in our shelter on any given day and an equal number living nightly in public places. We must do better and I believe that the work of the Task Force will create a system that is better prepared to address the needs of our veterans. It creates a true continuum of care that will focus specifically on the needs of veterans and move them through a system that is focused on placement into permanent housing. The concept of independent living is a strong and constant theme throughout the report. To meet this goal, community leaders, government agencies and elected officials must work together to identify new resources for creating permanent housing options that will benefit our veterans. I urge you and your colleagues to join us as we move forward on building a better future for the men and women who have served our country proudly.

Again, thank you for holding this hearing and for allowing me to address the members of the committee on this important issue. Commissioner Hess and I will be glad answer any questions you have about the work we are doing with homeless veterans.