

Department of Homeless Services Hearing Testimony

New York City Council Committees on General Welfare and Veterans *Oversight: Ending Veteran Homelessness and Hunger in New York City* Monday, November 10, 2014, 1:00 p.m.

Hello and good afternoon Chairmen Ulrich and Levin, and the members of the General Welfare and Veterans' Committees. My name is Iris Rodriguez, and I am the Assistant Commissioner for Adult Families and Veteran Affairs at the New York City Department of Homeless Services. Thank you for the opportunity to testify this afternoon. I am pleased to be testifying today alongside colleagues from the Mayor's Office of Veterans' Affairs (MOVA), which partners with DHS in many of our efforts to provide stable housing and resources for our city's homeless veteran population. This Agency last testified on this matter three years ago, and spoke at that time not only about our shelter facilities and service centers for homeless veterans, but also about increased efforts in street outreach and prevention to provide needed services to this population. Today, as we approach Veterans' Day – a day to honor the service and accomplishments of those who defend our nation – I am happy to report on the progress the City has made in this very important endeavor.

Today, approximately 210,000 veterans are living in New York City, 1,300 of whom are homeless, 700 residing in DHS shelters, 500 in the VA's Grant Per Diem program, and 100 on the streets. Since 2007, this Agency has successfully placed over 6,500 homeless veterans into housing, including 850 through the HUD-VASH (Veterans Affairs Supportive Housing) program, which provides rental vouchers and VA case management services to the most vulnerable veterans. I am heartened to report that Veteran homelessness in New York City has declined by 64-percent since 2011 (3,032 fewer homeless veterans), an achievement for which the New York City Continuum of Care, of which DHS is the lead agency, was recognized by the National Alliance to End Homelessness last Wednesday, November 5th, as part of its Never Another Homeless Veteran campaign.

These achievements are founded upon a longstanding partnership between DHS, MOVA, and the federal Department of Veterans' Affairs (VA) to provide comprehensive services to veterans living in New York City. As you know, within DHS's portfolio, we operate (in conjunction with the Mayor's Office and the VA) a veterans' multi-service center (the MSC) in downtown Brooklyn, which houses DHS' Veterans' Service Unit (VSU), as well as two transitional housing facilities dedicated to veterans –the Borden Avenue Veterans Residence (BAVR) and the Porter Avenue Veterans' Residence, and two city-owned supportive housing programs. Moreover, the Agency continues its robust street outreach programming and Homebase prevention services that focus on moving veterans into stable living situations.

I will now describe each of those facilities and programs in greater detail, as well as highlight new efforts by this Administration to address, and strengthen services for, veteran homelessness.

In 2008, DHS, MOVA and the VA collaborated to open the Multi Services Center (MSC) at the VA-run Chapel Street Veterans Health Care Center in Brooklyn. Within this Center is the DHS and VA joint-staffed Veterans' Service Unit (VSU). The VSU a national model, functions as a single point of access dedicated to serving homeless veterans by connecting them to VA services and benefits, as well as assistance obtaining housing, employment, substance abuse and mental health treatment, and peer support groups. The New York State VA office and Human Resources Administration (HRA) Veterans' Center are also co-located inside the MSC to provide ease and efficiency of service.

When necessary, VSU staff refers homeless veterans to one of the two DHS short-term veterans' residences: Borden Avenue and Porter Avenue. The Borden Avenue Veterans' Residence in Long Island City, Queens, provides transitional housing to 215 male and 28 female veterans. With Institute for Community Living (ICL) serving as the provider, Borden Avenue began operating in 2008 as a VA Grant Per Diem Program, which funds transitional housing for up to 24 months. As many of the veterans referred to Borden have medical and/or mental health needs, the residence has a nurse practitioner and clinical personnel on staff, as well as an Article 28 clinic adjacent to the building to provide medical and dental services to veterans and residents of the community. These programs offer assistance to our veterans who suffer from clinical disorders including PTSD, Traumatic Brain Injuries (TBI), sexual trauma, and others. Borden also retains a full-time VA social worker on-site to provide seamless coordination between the VA and DHS.

The Porter Avenue Veterans' Residence, located in Bushwick, Brooklyn, provides temporary housing to 138 male veterans. The site, operated by the Doe Fund opened its doors in 2009, began as a VA Grant Per Diem funding program. Porter's residents have the option of participating in the Doe Fund's Ready, Willing, and Able program, a 9-12 month program providing education and vocational training, computer instruction, relapse prevention, and job development. A VA social worker is stationed at the residence to provide a seamless continuum of care amongst the Provider, DHS and the VA.

Both Borden and Porter have on-site certificate-based culinary arts programs for their veterans. Those who participate are trained to receive food handling certificates and are responsible for preparation of every meal and special event held on and offsite. Both sites also work collaboratively with HRA's child support initiative to reduce the barriers of non-custodial veteran parents.

In addition to short-term housing options, some homeless veterans are eligible to receive HUD-VASH Section 8 vouchers. Service providers refer clients to the VSU, which in turn refers veterans to one of the city's VA medical centers, which assess client eligibility. Upon the VA's determination of eligibility, the New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) and the New York City Department of Housing Preservation Development (HPD) administer the vouchers to assist veterans into public and subsidized housing, as well as housing in the private market. By pairing rental subsidies with VA-supported case management services, HUD-VASH vouchers keep veterans in their homes. This program has been successful; to date we have had over 900 DHS veterans issued vouchers.

DHS also funds social services at two City-owned, Volunteers of America (VOA)-operated SROs, strictly designated for veterans. These programs, the Commonwealth located in the Bronx

and the 119th Street Veteran's Residence located in Harlem, provide needed stability to veterans through the provision of case management services at these locations. Through these services, VOA staff links residents to employment, mental health and substance abuse services, and other resources, as appropriate. Through its program oversight, DHS conducts two full program reviews per year - one announced and one unannounced – to address VOA's performance on program issues such as clinical interventions and case management. During these reviews, DHS interviews tenants, monitors case records to ensure service delivery, and also assesses building conditions. To ensure the highest quality of care and services, and in response to recent concerns expressed by residents, we plan to increase the frequency of these reviews and to arrange inspections by DHS' Maintenance and Repair unit at each building to assess infrastructure needs and to establish capital funding priorities. We also plan to increase our and VOA's tracking and monitoring of all tenant complaints.

Next, DHS coordinates supportive and prevention services to homeless veterans within its system through the Supportive Services for Veteran Families (SSVF) program. SSVF provides supportive services designed to promote housing stability (including access to benefits, cash assistance, housing court advocacy, job training and employment) to low-income veteran families or individuals either residing in shelter or transitioning to permanent housing. SSVF operates a "housing first" model, and it can provide up to five months of rental assistance to stabilize housing and prevent eviction. This fiscal year, the VA awarded SSVF \$22.66 million to fund seven not-for-profit social services organizations in New York. A task force comprising of DHS, the VA and the SSVF Providers, work diligently to identify those that can benefit from Rapid Re-Housing, with the ultimate goal of having SSVF Providers perform outreach in DHS shelters to assist our veterans in returning to the community.

The NYC Coalition on the Continuum of Care, of which DHS is the lead agency, established a Veterans' Task Force on October 18, 2013. Co-led by DHS and the VA, the coalition also includes representatives from city agencies HPD, HRA, and NYCHA; as well as the Supportive Housing Network of New York (SHNNY), HELP USA, Volunteers of America, Services for the Underserved (SUS), Jericho Project, Corporation for Supportive Housing (CSH), and Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America (IAVA). In support of this valuable initiative, the Task Force (1) analyzes gap in services provided by the VA and develops planning to close these gap by maximizing and coordinating existing resources, particularly for those deemed ineligible for VA services and benefits; (2) creates a point-of-contact to spearhead forthcoming VA resources and to maximize participation in the 25 Cities Campaign; and (3) engages in the seven SSVF Providers in the city to coordinate homelessness prevention and rapid re-housing resources provided through the VA-SSVF grant program. Through the task force, we have been able to reduce bottlenecks amongst the various government entities providing services and benefits, and provide faster service delivery to our veterans. Of note, the Executive Committee of the Task Force also serves as the leadership group for Mission:Home.

DHS and the VA launched the 25 Cities Initiative for NYC, also known as Mission: HOME, which seeks to end veteran homelessness in the City. The initiative began on June 10, 2014 at an event attended by over 100 partners from federal, state and city agencies, community leaders and other stakeholders. Since that date, we piloted a coordinated assessment tool called the VI-SPDAT, and SSVF providers have screened over 1,025 homeless veterans living in homeless shelters and Grant per Diem programs throughout the city. The goal of the coordinated assessment tool is to

help clients move faster to permanent housing and to improve the collection of data and information about what kind of services clients need. We continue to evaluate the effectiveness of this assessment tool, and will make changes as necessary to improve the initiative. As part of the process to expedite the return homeless veterans to housing, DHS also convenes weekly case conferences to ensure veterans receive housing intervention customized to their needs and are provided with assistance overcoming bureaucratic barriers to benefits. DHS also will be sponsoring a housing fair for homeless veterans, and is planning a training for staff on veteran-specific resources and how to access them.

Finally, last year, we began a partnership with the Robin Hood Foundation to combat chronic street homelessness amongst New York City's veteran population. The Robin Hood Foundation provided a grant to three DHS street outreach teams – Manhattan Outreach Consortium, Common Ground, and BRC - to fund veteran-specific outreach workers who assist in moving veterans from the streets into transitional and permanent housing. In part due to this generous grant, there are now fewer than 100 chronically homeless veterans on the streets in the city, as street outreach teams assisted them in obtaining HUD-VASH vouchers, NY NY supportive housing, as well as placements into safe havens or stabilization beds. This remarkable number is down roughly 20% from 120 last year. We have also partnered closely with the VA and have done joint outreach with them to some of the most chronic and vulnerable veterans living on the streets.

In conclusion, DHS is proud to report today on its significant reduction in veteran homelessness over the past few years. We could not have achieved this without our federal partners, the Veterans' Administration and the Department of Housing and Urban Development; our city agency partners, the Mayor's Office of Veterans Affairs, the New York City Housing Authority, the Human Resources Administration, and the Department of Housing Preservation and Development, and our community-based partners, the Doe Fund, Institute for Community Living, HELP USA, Samaritan Village, Services for the Underserved, Volunteers of America, Black Veterans for Social Justice, and the Jericho Project. We also would like to thank, and take a moment to recognize, former DHS Commissioner Robert V. Hess, who passed away last winter, for his valiant efforts to reduce veteran homelessness in this City. A veteran himself, Commissioner Hess's efforts led to the opening of the VSU, Borden and Porter Avenue shetlers, as well as the development of the various initiatives I have discussed today– and the City would not have made the progress it has without his initiative and leadership. He is missed, not only by the Agency, but also by this City's veterans.

We strive to continue building upon our model of care in order to end veteran homelessness in the City. Additionally, we are committed to ensuring that our veterans reside in safe and comfortable environments, and as such will continue to work to address their concerns at individual facilities. I thank you for holding this hearing on such an important issue and for bringing attention to these initiatives. I welcome your questions.