



On the dais, center, Representative Levin, to his left, Representative Bilirakis. In chairs, from left, Ms. White, Mr. Anderson, Mr. Raposa, Mr. Lambert, Mr. Burgess, and Mr. Battle

The U. S. House of Representatives Committee on Veterans' Affairs Subcommittee on Economic Opportunities held an official Congressional Field Hearing in New Port Richey, FL, on September 16th. The hearing was entitled "Combating Homelessness in the Tampa Bay Area" with the purpose of exploring best practices utilized throughout Tampa Bay and to identify gaps where more targeted intervention is needed.

Generally, such hearings are held in Washington, with testimony given by lawyers. A decision was made to bring Washington to the local communities in order to hear from those who are on the front lines of solving the Veteran Homeless problem. This was the second such session for this subcommittee; the first was held in San Diego, California.

I was invited to attend by Representative Bilirakis, along with members of several other veterans' organizations.

The panel consisted of Chairman Representative Mike Levin (D-CA 49), Ranking Member Representative Gus Bilirakis (R-FL 12), and Representative Vincent Spano (R-FL 15). There are 10 additional members of the committee who were not present.

Giving testimony were Mr. Joe Battle, Director, James A. Haley VA Hospital (Tampa); Mr. Danny Burgess, Executive Director Florida Department of Veterans Affairs; Mr. David Lambert, Chairman, Pasco County (FL) Housing Authority; Mr. Michael Raposa, Chief Executive Officer, St. Vincent DePaul CARES; Mr. Brian Anderson, Founder and CEO Veterans Alternative; and Ms. Mary White, a veteran who was a homeless single parent.

Mary White spoke, very courageously, of her ordeal, being a veteran and a single parent of an infant, who became homeless. She outlined the long process of getting aid, her difficulties with affordable childcare, and a lack of public transportation. Over several years, thanks to the support ultimately available to homeless veterans, she was able to persevere and now is finishing her master's degree and becoming self-supporting.

Some of the key points made during the hearing:

- A non-veteran can get temporary housing for all members of the family. Conversely, the VA will only pay for temporary housing for the veteran – not his/her family.
- The **HUD-VASH** (Housing and Urban Development - Veterans Affairs Supportive Housing) **program**, which combines Housing Choice Voucher (HCV) rental assistance for homeless Veterans with case management and clinical services provided by the Department of Veterans Affairs, has helped reduce the homeless veteran population in the Tampa Bay area by about 70% and since 2011, homelessness among veterans in Florida has been effectively cut in half.
- There is no federal standard or method for accurately counting homeless veterans.
- To get a veteran into housing under the HUD-VASH program takes approximately 3 months. This timeline is unacceptable as, in most areas, there is no temporary housing available while a homeless veteran waits for the approval.
- In many areas, apartment owners will not rent to someone using HUD-VASH vouchers, largely due to the program not keeping up with fluctuating prices of housing. Also, HUD-VASH does not provide for move in costs i.e. 1st month, last month, and security/utility deposits.
- Many areas, such as Pasco County, do not have shelters for women and children, only for men.
- There are no transitional programs for incarcerated veterans to assist them in getting reestablished in society.
- St. Vincent DePaul CARES has tried to purchase housing for homeless veterans but none of the banks are willing to provide loans, even though HUD-VASH vouchers will cover the payments. A request was made of the Sub-Committee to work out a loan guarantee for such housing, similar to the VA home loan guarantees.
- Florida has a host of fragmented veteran services that augment the Federal VA system. This patchwork is local focused, community oriented, and effective for its regional population, but often work in silos: separate, distinct, and limited in their focus. Better coordination on the state level is necessary.
- Key needs are transportation and childcare assistance for homeless veterans transitioning into stable housing and employment.
- A recommendation for enhanced transitional services for separating service members to help reduce the likelihood of the veteran becoming homeless.

There was also discussion about the June 6, 2019 launch of the new and improved Veterans Community Care Program, implementing portions of the VA Maintaining Internal Systems and Strengthening Integrated Outside Networks Act of 2018 (MISSION Act), which both ends the Veterans Choice Program and establishes a new Veterans Community Care Program. The MISSION Act will

strengthen the nationwide VA Health Care System by empowering Veterans with more health care options.

After the formal hearing I had an opportunity to speak with both Representative Bilirakis and Representative Levin.

During the recent JWV convention in Richmond, VA, a number of resolutions were approved. One of those concerned the large number of unclaimed cremains (ashes) of veterans sitting in funeral homes and morgues around the country. The overwhelming number of these are of formerly homeless veterans. My post, 373 Tampa, is undertaking a project to inquire of local funeral homes and morgues to see if they have any unclaimed veteran cremains. If we find any, our next step will be to utilize the VA and other local resources to seek a next of kin. Ultimately, our goal will be to ascertain their veteran status and eligibility for burial in a VA cemetery, thus providing a proper burial for all veterans.

I felt this subject was germane to the hearing and I asked Representative Levin about making this a national priority. He acknowledged a concern about this but informed me that it actually falls under another Sub-committee, Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs, chaired by Representative Elaine Luria (D-VA). Representative Bilirakis is also a member of this sub-committee. Representative Levin will have his legislative aide contact me with who to speak with on the sub-committee.

Additionally, I spoke with Representative Bilirakis and his Outreach Director, Rob Fleege, about what my post, the Department of Florida, and the JWV as a whole, can do to help with the homeless veteran issue. Rob Fleege will contact me for a meeting to discuss what we can do in addition to what the JWV is already doing.

I feel this Congressional Field Hearing was an excellent example of bi-partisan cooperation for the benefit of veterans, especially homeless veterans. It was apparent that all concerned hold veterans in high esteem and are genuinely interested in honoring veterans in any way possible.