

**Testimony of Msgr. Joseph P. Kelly**  
**Scranton Diocesan Executive Director of Catholic Social Services**

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Thank you Senator Baker and your committee for the opportunity to testify concerning the need of homeless veterans in the Commonwealth and in the County.

The Veterans Administration estimates there are nearly 68,000 homeless veterans. More than 5,000 are women.

C.S.S. is currently conducting a survey of veterans and their needs. The survey is being distributed in the shelters operated in Wilkes-Barre and Scranton as well as the Soup Kitchens in Wilkes-Barre and Scranton operated by Catholic Social Services. The survey has also been sent to all shelters in the 11 counties of the Diocese of Scranton.

CSS has operated VA Homeless Residential programs since 1987 and operates St. Anthony's Haven/Men's and Women's Shelter in Scranton and Mother Teresa Haven in Wilkes-Barre. In addition, CSS owns, operates the following:

- 1) Gabriel House (16 units of transitional housing for women and children) with veteran preference.
- 2) St. James Manor (16 units of transitional housing for homeless veterans)
- 3) VA-SRO program (8 units)
- 4) VA Homeless Program in Scranton (6 bed 24-hour residential program facility for mentally ill homeless veterans)
- 5) St. Stanislaus Apartments (6 designated for homeless veterans permanent)
- 6) St. Hedwig's (12 permanent apartments – handicapped accessible)
- 7) St. Ann's (11 permanent apartments for Veteran Families)

**We are awaiting approval from P.H.F.A. in March for:**

St. Francis of Assisi Commons, is 30 units, homeless veterans, rental housing project located in the City of Scranton, Lackawanna County. Supported by Catholic Social Services of Scranton (CSS), the St. Francis of Assisi Kitchen, and the Department of Veterans Affairs, St. Francis Commons is an innovative approach to extending existing services to homeless and low-income individuals in Scranton while providing safe, decent, affordable housing to homeless veterans. The development will help further HUD's priorities of creating new beds for the chronically homeless and creating new housing beds for disabled veterans.

The project is affiliated with the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Community Homeless Assessment, Local Education, and Networking Group (*Project Chaleng*) chartered to assist local communities nationally to serve homeless veterans. In its annual report, (*Project Chaleng*) estimated there were 382 homeless veterans in the Northeastern Pennsylvania region as of mid-2009. The report also projects that the area could use an additional 20 emergency beds, 15 transitional beds, and 35 permanent housing beds. Of the twenty-one subsidized and affordable housing developments in the market area, containing nearly 2,000 units, all are virtually fully occupied; most with extensive waiting lists. The Scranton Housing Authority manages, 1,300 of the units with only 15 vacancies and a waiting list containing over 500 names.

The Scranton area homeless population has risen due to the Marcellus Shale housing crisis. St. Francis Commons will service rural homeless veterans living in the 19 county area of the Wilkes-Barre Veterans Medical Center including Bradford, Tioga, Sullivan, Susquehanna and Wyoming Counties. According to David Warke with (*Project Chaleng*), the Veterans Administration operating in the northeast region of PA is seeing a large number of veterans being displaced by high rents in Marcellus Shale counties. Shale residents no longer are able to afford living in the region and are migrating to Scranton for accessibility to services such as education, training and employment opportunities.

The building will consist of 30 SRO units; four of the units will be fully accessible including one unit equipped for the audio-visually impaired, the accessible units will have rents affordable to households at or below 20% of the area median income (AMI), twelve units will be affordable to households at or below 50% AMI, and fourteen units will be affordable to households at or below 60% AMI. The typical SRO units have 143 square feet of living space and the ADA units have 152 square feet of living space. Each unit has a private bathroom and small kitchen facility including a sink, under-counter refrigerator and microwave. The design will accommodate both male and female veterans in need of housing. Additionally, extra tenant storage space is established on every floor. Common areas on each floor include a full-sized kitchen, dining and

lounge areas, plus a community room/visitor lounge. In collaboration with the adjacent St. Francis Soup Kitchen, the 1<sup>st</sup> floor community service facility area will create a clothing bank and a grocery store-style food pantry (Super Pantry), meeting rooms, and offices to directly impact the residents. Veterans will help provide volunteer and training services at the clothing bank and food pantry. Through cooking classes at the Soup Kitchen, residents will learn how to prepare healthy meals with ingredients obtained from the Super Pantry. All services are free to residents and income-eligible general population.

The downtown area of Scranton lies within six blocks of the site and contains most retail outlets and services required for daily living including access to mass transit, food and eating establishments, library, three major hospitals, and the post office. The Steamtown Mall is located only 0.4 miles south of the site.

An independent study completed by Real Property Research Group (RPRG) concluded that, "There is a clear and strong need to provide modern, nurturing residential facilities for Veterans who have fallen on hard times...the VA has documented a large number of homeless Veterans in this region who are currently underserved. In addition, St. Francis of Assisi Commons should be fully occupied upon completion in 2012."

In conclusion, from the RPRG market study, "to break the cycle of unemployment and homelessness, veterans need a place that is secure, substance-free with supportive services in place that include counseling, job rehabilitation, medical care, and nutritional meals. Since there are no other facilities for homeless veterans in the Scranton Area, the demand for these units should remain strong.