



Statement of
Vietnam Veterans of America
Pennsylvania State Council

Submitted by
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Before the
Pennsylvania Senate Veterans Affairs
And Emergency Preparedness Committee

Regarding
Homeless Veterans in the
Commonwealth of Pennsylvania

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Senator Baker, members of the Committee, brother and sister veterans. Good morning and thank you for the opportunity to present here today on behalf of Pennsylvania State Council of Vietnam Veterans of America.

I am Sandy Miller, a proud, life long resident of Pennsylvania and a Navy veteran of the Vietnam Era. I am currently the National Chair of Vietnam Veterans of America Homeless Veterans Committee and the Program Director for Homeless Veterans Residential Services for The Philadelphia Veterans Multi-Service & Education Center. As such, I oversee the operation of two homeless veteran transitional housing programs. One is a 95-bed facility for male veterans; the other is a 30-bed facility for women veterans.

In 1885, The Pennsylvania General Assembly decided there should be a home for indigent and disabled soldiers from Pennsylvania. The Pennsylvania Soldiers and Sailors Home in Erie was dedicated the following year. And so began over a century of providing for the veterans of the Commonwealth and a reaffirmation in what George Washington said, "When we assumed the soldier, we did not lay aside the citizen."

Pennsylvania is home to nearly one million veterans. According to the January 2011 joint US Departments of Housing and Urban Development and Veterans Affairs Point in Time Count, there were an estimated 1,392 reported homeless veterans in Pennsylvania. That represents 1.9% of the total homeless veteran population in the country on that day. I, personally, do not hold those numbers as fact.

We, the people of the Commonwealth, must work together to end the plight of our homeless veterans in Pennsylvania. We need funding to provide transitional and temporary housing, permanent housing; we need veteran preference within the Public Housing Authorities. We need employment and job training, including on the job training, with financial support in the form of stipends or tax credits to the employers.

We need, we need, we need...far too often we speak of what "we" say the homeless veterans need. According to the homeless veterans responses in the 2011 VA CHALENG Report, and the data collected in Pennsylvania, permanent housing, job training and placement, and child care ranked among the highest unmet needs. Just like politics, homelessness and the answers to ending homelessness are local.

The responsibility of informing these returning veterans and older veterans is on us, the citizens and leaders in the Commonwealth. We are the keeper of the gates. It is our duty to render assistance and provide guidance. It is the Commonwealth's obligation to see that resources are made available so these men and women do not fall through the cracks or get lost in the bureaucratic shuffle.

The new veterans returning from the current wars and conflicts are of a different generation than many of us. They are computer smart, internet savvy, and can be very impatient. They have iPads, iPods and iPhones...they have become accustomed to instant gratification. They tend to want what they don't know they want, but they want it now.

These citizen soldiers serve because they chose to serve, not because they were drafted or forced to serve. They made a conscious decision to serve. The state needs to make a conscious decision to make sure they are taken care of. We need to meet them on their field. We need to be better and quicker and, most of all, ready to provide assistance to them. Many of the newer veterans have families and small children. We need to ensure these families of National Guardsmen and women and Reservists are not displaced during times of deployment. We need to take care of those taking care of us.

These warriors must be prepared before they are separated from the military for reintegration into civilian life stressing job search skills, resumes, job placement through liaison with employers, health benefits, housing coordination, mortgage info, social skills, cultural reintegration. We must make sure that at every demobilization they are not only provided information, but provided a full medical and mental health evaluation and if necessary, referral for immediate care and treatment. They cannot wait months to have their PTSD treated...they need it now. Many suffer from traumatic brain injury, an “invisible” wound of this war. I know from personal experience the difficulties families have in dealing with traumatic brain injury. Without care, treatment, and most importantly, family education and understanding, traumatic brain injury can result in an upswing in the number of domestic abuse and violence issues, interactions with police, and yes, sometimes, unfortunately, suicide. I would encourage this body and the entire Pennsylvania legislature to communicate with their federal counterparts, taking forward a message that PTSD, traumatic brain injury, and suicide are of a great concern.

Every county in this Commonwealth has abandoned or vacant buildings, accumulating a multitude of dollars in unpaid taxes. I submit that these buildings could be transformed into transitional or temporary housing for those returning veterans or the older veterans who have no where to go or those who need mental health treatment. When I drive through my very small hometown and see vacant and abandoned steel mills and factories, I envision the number of veterans I could house there...what we could do with that property...the jobs we could create. These buildings could be converted into county service and treatment centers. Through HUD and VA and state funding, couldn't these buildings be transformed...and lives transformed? With the increasing number of casinos and gambling establishments in Pennsylvania, couldn't tax revenue from them be utilized to provide a funding stream for homeless veteran services?

Because many of the newer veterans are women, women with children, and veterans with families, we must be ready to address their immediate housing needs as well. As of September 30, 2010, the VA reported 63,600 women veterans in Pennsylvania. Many of the women returning from Iraq and Afghanistan have reported alarmingly high instances of military sexual trauma resulting in disabling psychological conditions. Sexual abuse, harassment and unacceptable behavior continues in the military despite recent reports. It is imperative that every level within the chain of command be held accountable and charged, if necessary, with these crimes. Punishment must be commensurate with the crime.

As reported in the US Government Accountability Office Report to Congress released in December 2011, entitled, “Homeless Women Veterans, Actions Needed to Ensure Safe and Appropriate Housing” the number of homeless women veterans has doubled since 2006. It also reported that they are between the ages of 40 and 59 and over one third have disabilities. The

biggest barrier to care and treatment within the VA for women veterans is their lack of awareness of programs and services available to them. Many women and men, as well, who did not serve in “combat” still do not consider themselves “veterans”. This is a marketing problem; not just within the Department of Veterans Affairs, but throughout the system, local, state and federal.

Altoona has instituted a Veterans Preference within their Public Housing Authority. Is this throughout the state? I don’t know, but it should be. Those who have “borne the battle” should be able to have a roof over their heads, not just one night, but every night. There is no excuse or reason why anyone who has worn the uniform of the country should go unsheltered or homeless, not even for one night. When housing is needed and available it must go to those who made the choice to defend this country.

With urban blight everywhere, why can’t abandoned housing be reclaimed through eminent domain, refurbished and utilized. This would provide the revitalization of communities and veterans across the Commonwealth. It could generate the return of the “*home town America*” mentality. These buildings sit vacant, rotting before our eyes, falling down into piles of rubble. Let’s rebuild our inner cities and give these young veterans a chance at homeownership. Processes similar to Habitat for Humanity, where the veteran invest “sweat equity” in the rebuilding and renovation, and at the end could be handed the deed, mortgage-less, debt-less, and most importantly, no longer home-less.

Millions of dollars a year go into the operation and upkeep of the State Veterans Homes. Many of these properties have acre upon acre of open land. With the increase in the number of aging veterans in the state, and in keeping with the original mission of caring for indigent and disabled Pennsylvanians, has there been any thought to increasing the capacity of the homes? As my generation enters into our “golden” years, we need to plan ahead for those who will eventually follow us. With just over 1,600 beds, and, according to the VA, approximately 70% of the Pennsylvania veteran population being age 55 or older, I would think additional beds would be both justified and beneficial in providing care and treatment. With the increase in Alzheimer’s and dementia, coupled with the aging population, nursing home beds in Pennsylvania will be at a premium and not be able to adequately address the veteran need. These aging veterans will not survive on the streets and in the shelters. We must be able to provide the aging homeless veterans with safe and secure living accommodations. We cannot rely solely on the federal VA system to provide these services. We must make full use of vacant, state owned properties - properties that could be turned over to non-profit agencies and organizations, renovated and brought on-line to provide services locally.

Nearly three years ago a study was done suggesting the need for additional state nursing homes in Pennsylvania. The “Report Submitted to the Pennsylvania Department of Military and Veterans Affairs ... Veterans Homes Needs Assessment and Feasibility Study Of Additional Veterans Homes, was published March 31, 2009.” The study evaluated current and anticipated demand for services, compared it to the services available from the DMVA and other health care providers, and identified shortfalls in bed capacity in multiple areas of the Commonwealth. The team recommended building three facilities at geographically dispersed locations and devised budget and planning figures, following guidelines from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (USDVA) and the Pennsylvania Department of Health (DOH). In April 2010, Brigadier General

Cecil Hengeveld, Acting Deputy Adjutant General for Veterans Affairs, reported to this committee. He reported that a feasibility study concluded that changes in the aging veterans' population, coupled with new requirements for how best to house veterans in long-term care facilities and the best mix of facilities across the state, indicate a need for additional veterans' homes in three regions of the state. To some extent, the report focused on optimizing the locations of veterans' homes to meet the need of veterans' populations in light of the fact that most veterans do not want to travel more than 50 miles from home for long-term care. Perhaps now is the time to reconsider the recommendations in the study and to make the investment in additional state veteran homes. We acknowledge that there may be some reluctance on the part of VA to invest in more real estate because of a trend toward "Housing First".

If we are to reintegrate our homeless veterans back into the community, we must be able to provide job training, retraining and employment. Through Department of Labor Homeless Veterans Reintegration Programs, Pennsylvania Career Link, and community resources, we can do this. Veteran Preference in applying for jobs should be a given. If a veteran applies for the job, has the experience and skills necessary to do the job, then he or she should get the job, plain and simple. When state jobs come available, qualified veterans should always be the first pick.

We must, however, provide incentives to employers who take the time and effort to train or retrain these veterans on the job. Tax credits are the easiest way to provide such incentives. Many of our veterans, both young and old, acquired extraordinary skills in the military. These skills must be taken advantage of by employers.

Many of these men and women served in senior leadership roles across all the military services. Leadership cannot be taught; it must be nurtured. If given the opportunity to return to a leadership role, I have no doubt these veterans would step to the plate. Let's give our veterans the chance to transfer skills learned in the service to civilian equivalent jobs. Extend licenses and certifications based on military experience and skills. While working at AT&T, I found that almost 100% of the workers in the trades fields were veterans and learned their trade while in uniform. Let's focus on what they learned and what skills they gained. This country has invested great amounts of money into their training; let's use them to their fullest capacity in the community, to rebuild the community.

I submit that, if the mission is given, the veterans of this Commonwealth will complete it. Failure is not an option. If we give them the resources they need, such as training, retraining, employment, housing...they will not fail. As service providers in the field, if we are provided resources and funding to enhance programs and services to homeless veterans, we will not fail.

I will remind this body of two quotes which I find very appropriate. One by George Washington, which states, "The willingness with which our young people are likely to serve in any war, no matter how justified, shall be directly proportional to how they perceive Veterans from earlier wars were treated and appreciated by their nation." And second is by General H. Norman Schwarzkopf, "The truth of the matter is that you always know the right thing to do. The hard part is doing it."

Thank you for allowing me the honor and privilege of presenting here today.

Sandra A. Miller

Sandra Miller currently serves as Chair of Vietnam Veterans of America Homeless Veterans Committee. She has served on the VA Advisory Committee on Homeless Veterans since 2003. Ms. Miller was a volunteer at Philadelphia Stand Down from 1995 until 2001.

Ms. Miller currently works as the Program Director of Residential Services for The Philadelphia Veterans Multi-Service & Education Center. She is responsible for the operation of Residential Services, including LZ II Transitional Residence for homeless male veterans and The Mary E. Walker House for homeless female veterans. She is responsible for insuring the goals and objectives of all homeless veteran residential programs are accomplished within the prescribed time frame and funding parameters.

She served in the U.S. Navy from 1975 until 1981 as a Radioman. During Ms. Miller's military service, she received numerous awards including a Good Conduct Medal, Navy Meritorious Unit Citation w/1 Bronze Device (2 awards), Zaire Airlift Letter of Commendation, U.S. Naval Forces Europe Letter of Appreciation, and numerous Command Petty Officer of the Quarter awards. Ms. Miller was awarded the AT&T Microelectronics National Volunteer of the Year in 1995 and the Lucent Technologies Humanitarian Service Award in 1996. She also received Vietnam Veterans of America, Region II James "Pop" Johnson Memorial Distinguished Service Award in 1998 and the Chapel of Four Chaplains, Legion of Honor Award, in September 2000 for her work with homeless veterans.