

Testimony of William M. Reed
The YWCA of Greater Harrisburg
Director of Economic and Neighborhood Development/Veterans' Programs

Senator Baker and distinguished Committee members,
Thank you for affording me the opportunity to testify before you today, on significant challenges facing homeless and potentially homeless Veterans within the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania.

The YWCA of Greater Harrisburg established the first Department of Labor, Homeless Veterans Reintegration Program (HVRP) in Central Pennsylvania in 2006, to assist homeless Veterans obtain employment, housing, assistance in obtaining benefits leading to a transition from homelessness to a life of dignity and self-sufficiency. As this program reached out to underserved homeless Veterans in the Greater Harrisburg Area it became apparent that additional resources were needed to overcome the complex challenges facing the regions' homeless Veterans. This realization led to the expansion of the YWCA's VETS programs to include:

- An expanded HVRP program that serves over 100 single homeless Veterans, in a 5 county area, per year
- Re-establishment of an Annual Homeless Veterans' Stand Down supported through collaboration with the Department of Veterans' Affairs, PA National Guard, Veterans Organizations, and a growing number of additional service agencies, and volunteers
- The addition of a Department of Labor Homeless Female Veterans and Homeless Veterans with Families program that has served over 30 homeless female Veterans and/or homeless Veterans with accompanying families since the program began
- Establishment of 16 Department of Veterans' Affairs, Per Diem Only Transitional Housing for Homeless Veterans units in collaboration with the local YMCA
- Establishment of 5 disbursed Housing and Urban Development, Permanent Housing for Chronically Homeless Disabled Veterans program single occupant residences.

The availability of Federal resources to expand the YWCA's VETS program represents a growing realization that the elimination of homelessness among Veterans has become a National priority with broad support requiring significant resources. For example, in the coming year the Federal Government has made a \$939 million Dollar commitment to reduce Veteran homelessness. This includes \$224 million for Grant and Per Diem transitional housing, \$202 million for HUD-VASH vouchers, \$100 million for Supportive Services for Veterans'

Families, over \$52 million for Department of Labor employment programs. At the local level, Veterans served by the YWCA of Greater Harrisburg have benefitted directly from every one of these housing and service investments. In addition, there are substantial increases in the overall Department of Veterans' Affairs budget to support specific contributors to Veterans' homelessness including Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI), Physical disabilities, Mental Illness, and Addiction.

These resources have led to some significant progress in eliminating homelessness among Veterans. The *Point in Time* survey of homeless individuals conducted nationally through area Continuums of Care shows a 12% reduction in Veterans reporting homelessness in one year, from 76,329 counted in 2010 to 67,495 in 2011. The number of Chronically Homeless Veterans has also declined by 13.5% since 2007. However, reported homelessness among female Veterans and Veterans with families is on the rise. Also, although overall homeless numbers were on the decline in nine Continuums of Care in PA in 2011's Point in Time survey, there were overall increases in seven continuums including the most populous locations.

The task of counting persons experiencing homelessness, including Veterans, in rural locations is difficult, since those persons have the greatest challenge accessing services and rely on well-meaning community support that often do not have the resources to target underlying causes of homelessness. Ultimately, many individuals are not part of the National Equation and are lost.

Access to additional resources such as increased housing specifically for eligible homeless Veterans, and greater collaboration between various government agencies, have made significant contributions to reduction in homelessness. Unfortunately, these initial gains may not address some long-term potential challenges facing Pennsylvania's Veterans. Some specific challenges facing Pennsylvania's homeless and potentially homeless Veterans that are not being adequately addressed include:

- Eligibility for VA benefits for all PA National Guard Personnel activated in the ongoing War on Terror.
- Specific employment challenges for Combat Military Veterans and members of the National Guard such as reintegration into civilian workforce.
- Adequate tailored services for homeless female Veterans including affordable and accessible childcare, and counseling for Military Sexual Trauma and related PTSD.
- Access to VA facilities for many PA Veterans.
- Greater access to adequate housing stock for PA Veterans especially those living in areas with shortages in affordable housing.

Pennsylvania has one of the Nation's largest and most frequently deployed National Guard forces. Since September 11, 2001, over 17,000 PA National Guard members have deployed in response to the War on Terror, many to multiple combat tours. Thousands of these Guard members have or will be returning to over 90 communities in 52 counties. These men and women are returning to a challenging economic climate, face reintegration challenges and often find it difficult to seek out and obtain needed services that could help prevent eventual homelessness. These challenges have the potential to significantly impact Pennsylvania's Veterans but because so many were members of the National Guard, they may not receive the same level of resource commitment through Federal programs as other states.

Women make-up 14.6% percent of those serving on Active Duty, 15.5% of those serving in the National Guard and 19.5% of Reservists. Based on a recent Women in Military Service For America Memorial Foundation report, 63,537 Pennsylvania Veterans are female. These women often find the current support system tailored to meet male service member needs with inadequate programs that address specific challenges faced by female Veterans. Traditional methods for locating, assessing and providing services to homeless Veterans often fail to address barriers facing homeless women Veterans. For instance, homeless female Veterans and families with children may lack adequate childcare to access these services. Women who experienced military sexually trauma may be unwilling or unable to share concerns including PTSD with individuals untrained in these sensibilities.

Many services designated to serve homeless Veterans and Veterans in danger of becoming homeless are located great distances from the Veterans who need these services. Many of these Veterans in need lack access to their own transportation, live in areas that lack adequate public transportation systems or are incapable of utilizing current transportation services available. This trend contributes to migration of homeless Veterans to specific areas, and leads to the exhaustion of local resources.

Many homeless and potentially homeless Veterans in Pennsylvania may have access to supportive housing vouchers but lack access to adequate affordable housing stocks within their communities. These individuals often have to decide between leaving established support systems in their community and choosing housing availability elsewhere. It leads to migration from areas lacking housing stock but taxes the services and housing in areas where housing is available but limited.

The need for additional resources to meet these challenges is supported by evidence from the Department of Veterans' Affairs', Community Homeless Assessment, Local Education, and Networking Group (*Project CHALENG*), The National Coalition for Homeless Veterans, the U.S.

Interagency on Homelessness, and most of all through experience gained through local and grass roots provision of services to homeless Veterans in Pennsylvania.

In conclusion, it is requested that steps be taken to build a collaborative strategy be similar to the U.S. Interagency on Homelessness for Commonwealth Agencies and Community Partners, by being coordinated, efficient and integrated to address Pennsylvania' homeless Veterans needs. Access to all available resources for homeless Veterans in Pennsylvania will only come about by intentional coordination. Such collaboration between various stake holders and agencies will ensure that resources are utilized in a way that they reduce and prevent homelessness from occurring among Veterans in Pennsylvania. Finally, pro-actively seek ways to prevent homelessness among Veterans from occurring, and take steps to prepare for future homelessness challenges.