

Pennsylvania Senate and House Veterans Affairs and Emergency Preparedness Committee Hearing

March 23, 2017

Testimony from U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, Veterans Integrated Service Network 4

Introduction

Enhancing strategic partnerships, an ongoing and paramount effort throughout VA, allows the Department to extend the reach of services available for Veterans and their families. Strong partnerships with our colleagues at the state level are vital for providing our nation's heroes with the care and services they have earned and deserve.

At the time of the 2014 census, more than 940,000 Veterans lived in Pennsylvania. Approximately 50% of those Veterans were 65 years of age or older. In VA's fiscal year 2016, more than 300,000 Veterans received care in one of 8 VA medical centers in this state.

Collaborative Advocacy

Staff throughout the VISN 4 network collaborate frequently and closely with many Pennsylvania County Veterans Affairs Directors. Examples include the following:

- Several county VA directors participate in the VISN 4 Director's Monthly Veterans Service Officer Conference Call, an informative and productive tool that identifies both successes and challenges in the shared mission of ensuring that Pennsylvania Veterans receive the care and services that they need and deserve.
- Many county VA directors maintain open dialogue with the directors of the 8 medical centers as well as the VISN 4 communications manager and successfully leverage those relationships to troubleshoot and solve issues for the Veterans they serve.
- Several county VA directors serve as active members on their local VA medical center's Veterans advisory councils and workgroups or Veterans service officer meetings.
- VISN 4 staff members are frequently asked to present at training meetings for the county VA directors.
- Erie County's VA Director, Thad Plasczynski, serves on the newly established community Veterans engagement board in that area. We are hopeful that more county VA directors get involved in these boards as they are formed throughout the state.

Additionally, the VISN 4 Network Director, or his designee, participates in each meeting of the Pennsylvania State Veterans Commission in order to exchange information and foster a collaborative multi-faceted partnership. **Providing Long-Term Care**

VISN 4 employees work closely with Pennsylvania employees to successfully continue bringing a federal grant to PA for our state Veterans homes. By ensuring that state Veterans homes provide care that

reflects the standard of care that we strive for in the Veterans Health Administration, we ensure that

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Pennsylvania's six homes continue to receive per diem payments for all Veterans they provide a home for.

In Pennsylvania, each state Veteran home has an appointed representative at the nearest VA medical center to ensure productive dialogue and compliance with all policies. These representatives have regular conference calls with each other to expedite and improve their ability to share information with their state home contacts.

Ending Homelessness

In VISN 4, we are extremely grateful that the state has taken on a key role in ending Veteran homelessness. This effort does require the hard work and support of an array of entities, which we feel fortunate to work with.

The Governor's Challenge to Significantly Reduce Veteran Homelessness in 100 Days exceeded its goal of permanently housing 550 Veterans within the last 100 days of 2015 by 145 Veterans. Without Governor Wolf's impetus and committed resources, this monumental effort would not have been possible.

But the effort continues. Over the past two years, Nicholas "Chip" Gilliland, the state's Chief of Reintegration and Outreach, has served as our liaison, attending VA and community outreach events across the state.

VISN 4 staff and Pennsylvania DMVA staff has worked with other state and Continuum of Care partners to assist Veterans in accessing VA homeless programs such as Supportive Services for Veteran Families, HUD-VASH, Grant & Per Diem, and Contract Emergency Residential Services.

For Justice-Involved Veterans

The Veterans Justice Partnership, a unique collaboration between VA and the Pennsylvania Justice System, aims to get former Service members the treatment they need as an alternative to incarceration. Working together with local courts, VA staff connects Veterans with resources to help them combat the problems at the root of their legal troubles, such as behavioral health, substance abuse or other reintegration issues.

Additionally, VISN 4's Health Care for Re-entry Veterans program works closely with the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections to promote success and prevent homelessness among Veterans returning to the community following incarceration. Program staff works closely with the State Veteran Service Units at state correctional institutions.

Conclusion

VISN 4 is grateful for the level of support and collaboration we receive from our state partners, and we feel confident that this successful and productive relationship will continue to expand and improve. #

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