



KING COUNTY HOUSING AUTHORITY

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Testimony of Stephen Norman, Executive Director of the King County Housing Authority, before the U.S. Senate Appropriations Subcommittees on Transportation, Housing and Urban Development and Related Agencies; and Military Construction, Veterans Affairs and Related Agencies

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Chairman Murray, Chairman Johnson, Ranking Member Bond, Ranking Member Hutchison, and Distinguished Members of the Committee:

My name is Stephen Norman and I am the Executive Director of the King County Housing Authority. The Authority serves the metropolitan region surrounding the City of Seattle, comprising a series of urban and suburban communities that are home to over 1.2 million people. Last night an estimated 1,700 veterans were homeless on our streets or in our shelters.

I also serve as Vice President of the Council of Large Public Housing Authorities, whose members administer 35% of the VASH vouchers authorized over the past three years.

I am honored to be here today and thank you for the Committee's commitment to ending homelessness among those who have served our country. In particular I would like to acknowledge the tremendous leadership role played by Senator Murray both in Washington State and nationally.

The Housing Authority community is strongly supportive of the VASH program:

First, it is a major tool in local efforts to end homelessness among veterans in five years, an objective that Housing Authorities share with Congress, this Administration and our local communities. Studies have clearly shown that close coordination of housing and support services is the key to successfully stabilizing chronically homeless individuals.

Second, VASH represents an important model, combining HUD's housing programs with resources from a mainstream service system, an approach that must be replicated with other Federal Departments such as HHS and Labor if we are to successfully address the broader issues of homelessness in our communities.

This partnership carries with it both enormous promise and new challenges arising from the need to coordinate between programs with significantly different focuses, administered by bureaucracies that speak profoundly different languages.

I am here today to tell you, however, that the VASH program is a success. It is not housing our veterans at the rate at which we would like, success is not uniform around the country, and I believe that there are significant improvements that can be made to the program, but the basic premise is sound, and there are thousands of veterans now living in safe, decent housing and going about the task of getting their lives together because of it.

In King County, our Authority has partnered closely with the VA's Puget Sound Health Care System, Seattle Division, to address local needs. I have high praise for the dedicated line staff of the VA who are providing direct services to our veterans.

The Authority received an initial allocation of 53 vouchers in May of 2008, and by August 2009 was fully leased up. The veterans that we are housing struggle with significant disabilities. Many have bad credit and criminal history issues that have made brokering private sector landlord acceptance, even with a Section 8 voucher, difficult and time consuming.

We look at two key statistics in evaluating success. First, what we call the shopping success rate. All of our initial voucher recipients were able, some with considerable assistance, to successfully lease housing on the private market. The time from receipt of the voucher to move-in averaged 41 days. A second key outcome is housing stability. At present only two of these initial 53 individuals have lost their housing, a retention rate of 96%.

A second award of 52 vouchers was received in September of 2009. Over half of those vouchers are now leased up.

A key element in the success of the program has been communication. Very early in the process the Seattle and King County Housing Authorities developed an interagency memorandum of understanding with the VA that laid out respective roles and expectations. Program staff from the different agencies meet on a regular basis to evaluate progress and address operational issues. This approach, involving open, ongoing and structured communication, characterizes the most successful VASH programs around the country.

A number of areas have emerged, however, where we believe that the program can be strengthened:

First – The greatest frustration from the perspective of Housing Authorities nationally in quickly leasing up these vouchers has been the lack of a prompt and steady pipeline of referrals. Our understanding is that this delay, for the most part, has been caused by the need for local VA Medical Centers to hire additional caseworkers before they move forward with new referrals. This front-end lag is repeated with each new appropriation. A mechanism needs to be developed to either enable the VA to initiate the hiring process earlier or to shorten the length of time it takes to bring new case managers on board so that the program can hit the ground running.

Second – Robust cross-training of VA and Housing Authority staff needs to take place. As I mentioned before, both the language and cultures are profoundly different. VA staff, in particular, need training in understanding the Section 8 program eligibility requirements and in providing housing search assistance. In many locales across the country, including Minneapolis and Los Angeles, housing authority staff are now actively engaged in training their VA counterparts. This kind of training, stronger local communication protocols and the identification and dissemination of best practices needs to be institutionalized on the national level.

Third – Even with a Section 8 voucher, VASH clients need additional resources to pay screening fees, provide security and utility deposits and buy a modest amount of

furniture. The Seattle region is somewhat unique in having passed a levy several years ago specifically dedicating a portion of the local sales tax to veterans' issues. This has enabled our VASH program to tap into local funds to address these needs. In other communities such as San Diego, Homelessness Prevention and Rapid Rehousing Program (HPRP) funds are being utilized. This coordination of other HUD funds has been very helpful, but does not provide a permanent fix as HPRP was funded under the ARRA legislation and is not on-going. A small flexible allocation to the VA to address client move-in needs would go a long way in expediting the rental process.

Fourth – The VA needs to consider the more extensive involvement of community-based service providers in implementing the VASH program. These groups can be essential in providing outreach to homeless veterans who are not presently being served by the VA system, in assisting in housing search, as they are currently doing in Washington DC and Oakland, and in certain instances, particularly in supportive housing already being managed by a service provider, in providing the direct case management services. Contracting with outside providers may also be one partial solution to addressing the log-jam caused by delays in internally staffing up at the VA.

Fifth – KCHA currently administers over 2,000 units of scatter-site housing for households with disabilities and has found that it is essential to have a range of housing types available to successfully support different household needs. The creation of more site-based supportive housing – typically defined as housing developed by non-profit service providers with on-site services – is an important missing piece of the puzzle. Supportive housing is independent living with what we like to call a concierge level of services in the building – a vital additional layer that helps to assure that individuals remain successfully housed. Local service providers actively engaged with homeless veterans tell us that they believe that up to 50% of chronically homeless veterans could benefit from this approach. The ability to project-base VASH vouchers is a critical element in developing supportive housing and HUD to its credit has been flexible and responsive in helping to facilitate this.

An unresolved challenge to project-basing, however, is the matter of timing. In order to assist with the financial underwriting of new housing, project-based vouchers need to be committed in the pre-development stage of a project. It typically takes 18 to 24 months for this housing to actually come on line. In order to avoid placing funded vouchers on the shelf for an extended period of time, a mechanism needs to be developed to enable the forward commitment of future allocations. This will entail some level of certainty regarding the commitment of additional out-year vouchers and services, and should only be in-place until production has geared up to desired levels. Such an approach, however, is crucial for jumpstarting the pipeline of supportive housing needed to effectively address this issue, while assuring that vouchers already funded are put to immediate use.

Sixth – A degree of ambiguity persists in this program regarding the question of appropriate targeting. Many homeless, including homeless veterans, do not neatly fit into the program and treatment boxes we have created. A “housing first” approach, which is being utilized very effectively around the country in stabilizing chronically homeless individuals, is beginning to be adopted more broadly by the VA. I realize that this model may be difficult to reconcile with the traditional VA focus on success within

its treatment programs. Housing First, however, coupled with harm reduction, may be the only way to initially engage and stabilize a sizable portion of our street population.

Seventh – Veterans living on our streets suffer a broad array of disabilities including PTSD, traumatic brain injuries, depression and chemical addiction. The case management ratio established by the VA sets an across the board ratio of one case manager to every 35 clients. I respectfully suggest that local VA systems need more flexibility in matching case-load ratios to their client base. Some individuals will need more support, some less. Some will improve, some will get worse. A flexible funding approach that empowers local programs to allocate resources as needed should be considered. This will be particularly critical as the VASH program seeks to serve less engaged street homeless and to assure landlords that adequate response capacity is available to deal with individuals in crisis once they have been housed. An increased level of partnership with local providers, particularly around site-based supportive housing opportunities, may offer a partial solution to this.

The HUD FY 2011 Budget calls for a moratorium on new VASH vouchers, citing a backlog in unleased vouchers and a need to focus on the administration of the program. I believe it is prudent in a difficult funding environment to only ask for funds that are immediately needed. I note, however, that progress on leasing up existing vouchers is uneven. Some locales are struggling while others will fully lease up their 2010 voucher allocation before a 2012 budget is enacted. In addition, increased focus, in no small part due to hearings like this one, should significantly increase the learning curve and voucher utilization over the next six to nine months.

In King County we anticipate that we will have exhausted our available VASH vouchers by January 2011. To then stand-down and close our front-door, only to restart the lease-up process a year later, makes no sense operationally. Of the 1700 homeless veterans in King County, half are chronically homeless. If we are serious in our commitment to significantly address this issue within five years we need to sustain the momentum, the relationships and the program we have developed. While it may not be necessary to fund a full round of VASH vouchers in FY2011 it will be important to assure that there is a continued supply of new vouchers targeted to those locales that are efficiently utilizing their present allocations so that the existing progress be sustained and built upon.

Thank you again for the opportunity to report back on this program and I will be happy to answer any questions you may have.