



Community Action Partnership of North Dakota

Testimony

RE: HB1504

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**Submitted by Max Pontenila
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Bottineau, Burke, McHenry, Mountrail, Pierce, Renville, Ward



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Mr. Chairman and Members of the House Finance and Taxation Committee, my name is Max Pontenila and I work for Community Action Partnership (CAP)–Minot Region. Thank you for the opportunity to testify in strong support of HB1504, a bill that will strengthen North Dakota’s response to veteran homelessness by providing critical funding for long-term, sustainable housing solutions. By directing 50% of the gaming tax paid by Veteran Service Organizations into the Post War Trust Fund and the North Dakota Department of Veterans Affairs grant program, HB1504 ensures that these critical resources remain dedicated to meeting the specific and growing needs of veterans facing housing instability.

Before we begin, let me introduce myself. In my current role, I serve as a case manager for the Supportive Services for Veteran Families (SSVF) program. Prior to this position, I worked for the Department of Veterans Affairs where I was exposed firsthand to the homeless veterans crisis and the services that they offered to homeless veterans. I am a veteran of the United States Air Force, having retired honorably after 20 years of active duty service. I have multiple deployments under my belt, to include time spent in Iraq in 2004. Working with veterans is something that I am very passionate about as I have had many shared experiences and struggles with many of the clients that I now provide services to.

As a SSVF case manager my primary responsibility is to help homeless veterans and veterans at risk of homelessness. I cover seven counties within the CAP-Minot Region area of responsibility (Bottineau, Burke, McHenry, Montrail, Pierce, Renville, Ward). My roles and responsibilities



include, but are not limited to; providing direct case management, assisting veterans to find or maintain permanent and stable housing, assisting them with employment resources, coordinating with various agencies to provide wrap-around care to address mental health, substance abuse, medical, and social services needs. I work very closely with social workers from the Department of Veterans Affairs, their HUD-VASH program case manager, county Veteran Service Officers (VSOs), local landlords, and hotel managers. Without these critical relationships we would not be able to provide immediate shelter and services to homeless veterans and veterans at risk of homelessness. I also assist veterans apply for VA benefits (medical, disability, veterans pension program) by explaining to them what they are potentially eligible for and then getting them connected with the local VSOs and VA outpatient clinics in our region. The other part of my job as a SSVF case manager is to do outreach with local organizations, civic groups, and to base leadership on Minot AFB. By doing this, I am able to educate them about the SSVF program so if they are interacting with any veterans they are able to ask them about their housing stability, and if needed, provide a direct referral to our program. By providing base leadership with veteran resources in the local area, they are able to provide that information to servicemembers as they prepare to transition into civilian life. I also partner with local organizations to do homeless street outreach, doing so allows me to screen any homeless personnel and determine if they are a veteran and their potential eligibility for the SSVF program.

If a veteran is not already connected with military resources, sometimes the SSVF program is their first interaction with anything related to the services provided by the Department of Veterans



Affairs. Often the veterans are very surprised at the level of assistance, both in the case management and financial capabilities that the SSVF program can provide to them. Knowing that there are folks willing to help them significantly lowers their stress levels and can sometimes be the difference between life and death, given your current weather conditions.

As a case manager, we often at times do not know what types of struggles that the veteran will present with when they walk through our door. Therefore, it is important to establish trust and rapport with a veteran so that they are able to let their guard down and we are able identify their needs and get the right resources to them at the right time. As a veteran, I know firsthand how hard it is to allow yourself to raise your hand and say “I need help”. This because the military has trained us to be self-sufficient and to be able to overcome any situation regardless of the cost, be it mental, physical, or more often than not both. It was often perceived within the military sub-culture that asking for help was a sign of weakness. Within this context, veterans will sometimes wait until it is too late and they are deep in a crisis spiral before they even begin to ask for help. This negative spiral often leads to mental health issues, suicidal ideations, substance use and abuse, legal troubles, relationship issues, unemployment, and much more.

The SSVF program operates on the “Housing First” model; once a veteran is placed into permanent housing, case managers are able to work with the veteran to address all of the other issues that they present with. I once had a veteran disclose to me that in the days prior to his SSVF enrollment, he was on the brink of committing suicide. He had lost his job, was on the brink of being evicted, was



in financial trouble, and was suffering from loss and grief as he had recently ended a long-term relationship. With the case management provided by the SSVF program; we were able to get him into a new apartment, he was able to find a new job, and we were able to get him connected with the VA clinic for proper medical care. Over the course of a few months, he was able to maintain his employment so he was enrolled into the SSVF Shallow Subsidy program. The Shallow Subsidy program is a long-term rental assistance program where we cost share a 50-50 rental assistance for a maximum eligibility period of 24 months. Towards the end of his Shallow Subsidy contract he was able to find a new job that paid him much more than his previous job. He was able to reach his self-sufficiency goals ahead of his projected schedule, therefore he chose to graduate early from the Shallow Subsidy program and wanted us to “use that other money for veterans in need”.

The continued funding of the SSVF program allows veterans, that often times present with multiple issues, to be provided the stability of case management, services, resources, and vital support to ensure their success. I would like to highlight a few success stories that would not have been possible without the continued funding of the SSVF program:

- This Veteran was living temporarily with his son and daughter-in-law outside of the Minot area. He had reached out to the HUD-VASH and SSVF caseworkers asking for assistance as he was getting kicked out of their home. He had previously run his own business but due to age and injuries, he could no longer maintain steady employment. He wanted to move to Minot as there were no resources in the small town that they were currently living in. I was able to find him a new apartment, we used another CAP-Minot Region program

grant to pay for him to get new dentures which in-turn drastically increased his quality of life. I was able to co-manage his case with our HUD-VASH case manager. After we met his initial stabilization needs, we began to transition him into the long-term stabilization phase. He was transitioned to the HUD-VASH housing voucher and he was able to get enrolled into VA healthcare services. To date, he is still actively using VA healthcare services and continues to utilize the HUD-VASH voucher due to his limited income.

- This Veteran was staying temporarily with a friend “couch surfing” and had needed to leave his friend’s house. Shortly after his enrollment into the SSVF program, I was able to get him moved into a new apartment. He was able to get connected with the VSO to apply for VA disability benefits even though we knew that it would be a long process. He was able to maintain his employment during this time, but one day he needed critical car repairs so that he could continue going to work and to attend his medical appointments. The SSVF program was able to pay for his car repair so that he could continue to earn income and pay for his rent and utility bills. Eventually, and due to his medical conditions, the veteran was awarded a VA disability rating of 100%. This increase in income enabled him to meet his self-sufficiency goals and he successfully graduated from the SSVF program. He was able to move to another apartment that better suited his needs. He was able to get the proper medical, mental health, and medication management from the VA healthcare system. Currently he has his sights set for applying to the Fire Academy and is an active member in the local Volunteer Fire Department. Not only is he contributing to the local community, but he has since paid it forward by referring other veterans to the SSVF program.



The stories and experiences that I have shared above are not unique to just the Minot office. These are just many of the challenges and successes that myself and the other SSVF case managers face on a daily basis as we serve our North Dakota veterans. The military has a saying of “Leave no man behind”. The passing of HB1504 allows us, as a Nation, to keep the promise of taking care of our veterans, especially the homeless ones who often have no voice or someone advocating on their behalf. If you have any further questions or concerns, please feel free to contact me at (701) 839-7221, or via email at max@capminotregion.org. Thank you very much for your time today.

Sincerely,

Max Pontenila

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