

March 11, 2025

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Senate Agriculture and Veterans Affairs Committee:

On behalf of Southeastern North Dakota Community Action Agency (SENDCAA), I am writing in strong support of HB1504, which will direct 50% of the gaming tax paid by Veteran Service Organizations to the Post War Trust Fund or the North Dakota Department of Veterans Affairs grant program. This legislation is a critical investment in veteran services, ensuring that those who have served our country have the support needed to achieve housing stability and self-sufficiency.

SENDCAA is one of seven Community Action Agencies (CAAs) in North Dakota, operating programs that help individuals and families overcome poverty and build stable futures. Our agency serves Region V in North Dakota which includes Steele, Traill, Cass, Ransom, Richland and Sargent counties providing services such as housing assistance, case management, employment support, transportation, and financial education to low-income households—including veterans.

Through our partnership with the Supportive Services for Veteran Families (SSVF) program, we provide direct assistance to veterans experiencing or at risk of homelessness, helping them secure stable housing, healthcare navigation, and employment resources. Last year alone, we served 123 veterans through SSVF and witnessed firsthand the growing demand for veteran homelessness services. Many of the veterans we assist face significant barriers, including lack of affordable housing, employment instability, mental health challenges, and difficulty accessing VA benefits.

The number of veterans in our community needing access to our services continues to grow at a substantial rate. Our current data shows:

- Over 30 veterans in our community currently do not have access to permanent supportive housing and remain homeless.
- Current funding allows for approximately \$2500 per veteran enrolled in SSVF to receive supportive services and emergency financial assistance. Our evaluation shows the actual cost to provide comprehensive services is nearly \$5000 per veteran in our region.
- Although we have not turned any program eligible veteran away, we have been unable to truly provide the full set of services needed to allow veterans to reach self-sufficiency.

Despite our best efforts, funding remains a major challenge in meeting the rising need for veteran services. HB1504 will provide much-needed resources to ensure no veteran is left behind due to funding shortages.

On the following page you will read a story about John that demonstrates the true impact of the Supportive Services for Veteran Families Program.

Recently, the Fargo Supportive Services for Veteran Families (SSVF) program served an Army veteran who we will call John, who served over 20 years including tours during Operation Desert Storm and Operation Iraqi Freedom. John, like many veterans, faced challenges transitioning back to civilian life. He exited military service with service-related disability and just enough income to survive but needed support and stability to thrive.

Housing Instability Experience:

When John first contacted SSVF, he had experienced homelessness for the past eight years, often hiking across the country. Recently, due to health reasons, he recognized the need to settle in one location. For the past couple of months, he has been paying for a hotel, but his limited income, from his VA benefits, was depleting his resources. He reached out for help to the local VA, who directed him to the only resource that could help- SSVF.

How SSVF and Case Manager Helped the Veteran:

The Fargo SSVF program immediately stepped in to help. With no available shelter beds or other community resources, SSVF intervened and covered the cost of the hotel for a few additional days until he could move into his new home. SSVF helped pay for the hotel while John sought housing. He applied for an apartment with support from his co-signer, his AA sponsor. The SSVF case manager contacted the management company and arranged for the apartment to be held for John.

Eight days after the veteran enrolled in the SSVF program, John moved into his apartment, exiting homelessness for the first time since 2017. The SSVF case manager continued to ask him what he needed support with to create a safe home, which included providing household necessities, a bed, and helping move.

Since moving into his new apartment, John has made significant progress. He is receiving care from the VA, which he is satisfied with, and has expressed a desire to maintain his stability without further assistance. John feels confident that he can manage on his own now that he has stable housing. As of January 27, 2025, John chose to exit the program, expressing gratitude to the SSVF program. He now has a stable living situation, which is crucial for his health and well-being.

Impact of HB1504:

HB1504 is an investment in long-term solutions, not just temporary relief. By aligning financial resources with the needs of North Dakota's veterans, we can ensure that homelessness among those who served is rare, brief, and non-recurring.

Sincerely,



Brandon Kjelden

Executive Director

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