

Community Action Partnership of North Dakota Testimony

RE: HB1504

February 1, 2025

Submitted by Andrea Olson, Executive Director

Mr. Chairman and Members of the House Finance and Taxation Committee, My name is Andrea Olson and I serve as Executive Director for the Community Action Partnership of North Dakota (CAPND). 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.

Let me just take a quick moment to introduce Community Action. There are seven Community Action Agencies (CAA) across the state, and we operate programs that offer North Dakota residents opportunities to secure and maintain self-sufficiency. We are part of a National Network of over 1,000 CAA whose mission is helping people and changing lives. In North Dakota, our seven CAAs operate as private, non-profit organizations and collectively serve all 53 counties across the state and our Network annually serves 20,000 households who are experiencing hardship. Some of our programs include Head Start, Weatherization and Volunteer Income Tax Assistance. I am here today to share more about our Supportive Services for Veterans (SSVF), Program which serves low-income Veteran Families who are experiencing homelessness or who are on the brink of homelessness.

Supportive Services for Veteran Families (SSVF), is a federal program funded by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), helps low-income veteran households facing or experiencing homelessness. Since 2012, CAPND has administered this program statewide, providing housing

assistance, case management, healthcare navigation, employment support, and legal services to help veterans regain stability. The goal of SSVF is promoting housing stability among very low-income veteran families who reside in or who are transitioning to permanent housing. Each of our CAA is able to provide families with outreach, case management, healthcare navigation, legal services, and assistance in obtaining VA and other community benefits. SSVF Veteran families may be eligible for temporary financial assistance, including rental assistance, security deposit, utility assistance, hotel stays, transportation costs, moving costs, childcare assistance, and more. With additional funding from the VA, we are also able to offer Shallow Subsidies, an opportunity to provide a stable rental subsidy for up to two years for qualifying Veterans. CAPND also works closely with numerous partners to support SSVF; primarily the VA Medical Center's Homeless Service Program which includes HUDVASH (an intensive case management program that offers Housing Choice Vouchers to Veterans), Homeless Veterans Reintegration Program (HVRP), the North Dakota Department of Veterans Affairs and the North Dakota Association of County and Tribal Veteran Services Officers.

HB1504 will expand the ability to provide targeted financial assistance, working to ensure that every veteran experiencing homelessness in North Dakota has access to stable housing, case management, and supportive services. With increased demand this funding is more critical than ever.

The ultimate goal for all of the partners working tirelessly for Veterans experiencing homelessness each day is to achieve and sustain functional zero—a well-coordinated, efficient system where homelessness among veterans is rare, brief, and non-recurring, ensuring that no veteran is left without housing. Through our statewide partnerships, CAPND ensures that veterans receive more than just temporary financial aid—we actively support their path to self-sufficiency and long-term stability.

Each year CAPND serves an average of 300 Veteran Families in the SSVF Program. In 2024, CAPND served 362 veteran households statewide, reflecting a 70-household increase from previous years—a clear indication of growing need. Of these, 199 were at imminent risk of homelessness, while

163 were already homeless when they sought assistance. Through SSVF's rapid response approach, 141 households successfully transitioned into permanent housing, while 22 moved into temporary housing. Unfortunately, 17 households returned to homelessness, underscoring the challenges faced by vulnerable veterans. Additionally:

- The average length of time it takes SSVF to provide housing for Veterans is only 36 days
- From 2022-2023, 288 new veterans enrolled in the SSVF program, followed by an additional 195 new enrollments from 2023-2024, highlighting the ongoing and growing need for these critical services.
- In 2024 the average Temporary Financial Assistance (TFA) spent on an enrolled Veteran household: \$2,919. SSVF provided financial assistance for emergency housing assistance, general housing stability, rent assistance, security deposits. SSVF is a case management program first and foremost; financial assistance is secondary and intended to provide housing stability.

Veterans engaged with the SSVF Program often encounter multifaceted challenges, including, but not limited to: financial constraints, limited access to affordable healthcare, employment instability, mental health and/or substance abuse issues that further compound the complexity of experiencing homelessness. The systemic barriers involve gaps in financial assistance programs, and a lack of affordable housing options. These barriers are not just abstract challenges; they are the stark realities that veterans participating in SSVF face on a daily basis. As we engage with veterans in SSVF, we witness firsthand the intricate and interconnected nature of these hurdles.

By recognizing and understanding these challenges through our work with the SSVF program, we gain insight into the critical need for ongoing support and advocacy to break down these barriers and pave the way for veterans to reclaim stability and independence. And what we do works; allow me to share some successes:

- A veteran in Williston was at risk of eviction due to rent arrears, facing the very real possibility of homelessness. Seeking assistance, the veteran enrolled in SSVF, which provided the necessary financial support to cover back rent and prevent eviction. Recognizing the importance of long-term stability, SSVF also connected the Veteran to the Williston Veteran Service Officer (VSO) to apply for VA disability benefits, ensuring additional financial security. To further support the veteran's transition to stability, SSVF collaborated with Veterans Inc., connecting the veteran with job services and providing gas cards to facilitate employment opportunities. As a result of these combined efforts, the veteran successfully secured two sources of income and now maintains permanent housing. Because of these coordinated services and the dedication of multiple agencies, this veteran has not only avoided homelessness but has also achieved long-term financial and housing stability.
- A veteran in Minot enrolled in SSVF was still facing significant transportation challenges, relying on co-workers for rides or walking over 1.5 miles to work each day. Understanding that reliable transportation was essential for maintaining employment and long-term stability, the veteran set a goal to save enough money to purchase a car. Through participation in the SSVF Shallow Subsidy program, the veteran was able to maintain steady employment for over two years, diligently saving funds without taking on loans or fees. During this time, they also worked closely with a HUD-VASH caseworker to ensure consistent access to medical care, addressing both physical and mental health needs. Thanks to perseverance and targeted support, the veteran successfully purchased a reliable vehicle, providing much-needed independence and stability. Now, they can commute to work and handle daily errands without the stress of unreliable transportation. Even more, they are paying it forward by giving co-workers rides, helping others who face similar barriers. Additionally, with regular medical care and a prescribed treatment plan, the veteran has achieved improved well-being and greater self-sufficiency. Through

determination, collaboration, and strategic support, this veteran has not only secured stability but is also giving back to their community while maintaining steady employment and a higher quality of life in Minot.

As you diligently consider HB1504 and reflect on the multifaceted barriers faced by those experiencing homelessness, I urge you to reflect on the stories we have shared today. They underscore the importance of funding programs like SSVF that play a critical role in rebuilding lives and reintegrating veterans into stable, productive futures. They also reiterate long-term effects in fostering self-sufficiency, independence, and overall well-being. They emphasize the need for a holistic approach to support, collaborative partnerships and housing stability as a foundation for individuals to be able to address other aspects of their lives such as employment, mental health, and healthcare.

Supporting HB1504 is an investment in real, long-term solutions for North Dakota’s veterans. This funding will directly expand access to stable housing, supportive services, and financial assistance, ensuring that homelessness among veterans is rare, brief, and non-recurring. By passing HB1504, this committee has the opportunity to make a tangible difference in the lives of those who have served our country. I urge you to support this critical legislation and help us continue this vital work.

Thank you for your time and your attention to this important matter.

