

**STATEMENT OF
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NEW JERSEY HEALTH CARE SYSTEM
BEFORE THE
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

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Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee:

First, I would like to thank the Committee for the focus and leadership you have brought to the issue of homelessness. The Homeless Veterans Comprehensive Assistance Act of 2001 is landmark legislation that, if fully funded, will literally save the lives of thousands of America's homeless veterans. Furthermore, as a direct result of this Committee's support, Operation New Hope's mission has been protected. The Somerville Depot will continue to provide surplus clothing worth millions of dollars to homeless veterans throughout the country at Stand Downs and others venues.

Homelessness degrades and ultimately destroys the spirit of those who have served our Nation well. Although homelessness is a social condition, its roots can generally be found in poverty, often with the complications of mental and physical illness and substance abuse. Before these veterans can accept the help available for them, they must feel that there is hope for them to have a meaningful life. Transitional housing is a critical ingredient of the rehabilitative process, but as The Homeless Veterans Comprehensive Assistance Act of 2001 recognizes, solving homelessness requires a coordinated response that includes outreach, treatment, employment, and permanent housing.

Legislative authority and resources are essential in addressing homelessness. But even the visionary leadership of persons like Ms. Gay Koerber is not sufficient without similar commitments at the local level. Mr. Kenneth Mizrach, the Director of the VA New Jersey Health Care System and Mr. James Farsetta, the VISN 3 Network Director, have been willing to take risks and provide the support needed to create the dynamic new homeless services now found in New Jersey. They made this commitment in spite of the enormous strains VERA has placed upon area resources. Their commitment stems from their understanding and their will – the will required to tackle this complex, life threatening condition.

One of the great challenges we have faced and one of the greatest needs identified by homeless veterans is assistance in finding employment. Almost all homeless veterans come to us with poor job histories and many have criminal records. It is difficult to find employers who will take a chance on hiring them.

However, after a period of meaningful work and skill development, we have found that veterans can find work in the community. The challenge has been to develop the opportunities where homeless veterans can gain those skills and experiences.

I am indeed fortunate to work in a VA medical center where risk taking is encouraged. As we have reached out to the local community, we have found willing partners who share our vision. Sitting next to me is Carroll Thomas, the CEO of Middlesex County's Economic Opportunity Corporation (MCEOC). They have partnered with us to form MAVERIC (Moving America's Veterans into Employment and Residences In the Community), creating scores of employment opportunities and new housing without spending medical appropriations. MAVERIC has allowed us to open a greenhouse, a retail store, a construction team, a catering business and soon a golf driving range. These self-sustaining enterprises provide paid jobs for homeless veterans throughout New Jersey while contributing to the local economy. In fact, these businesses have also helped produce the revenue to open two homes now housing formerly homeless veterans. MCEOC bought these houses inexpensively from the VA's foreclosure list. The cost was low because they were run down, although located in pleasant residential areas. MAVERIC was then able to employ the Veterans Construction Team to rehabilitate these homes.

Other groups, excited by the potential of these partnerships, have made significant contributions. For instance, we are nearing completion of a golf course driving range dedicated to assisting homeless veterans. Arthur Muller, the National President of Rolling Thunder has pledged \$100,000 to this project. Rolling Thunder's generosity made this project possible. Design services of a preeminent golf course architect, John Harvey, were donated in the planning of this facility. MCEOC will handle the financial and business management of the course. These contributions from sources outside the VA are a statement of caring and belief that together the VA and the community can help homeless veterans rebuild their lives.

If given the opportunity, there are many who are willing to make a difference in the lives of homeless veterans. This committee has had staff visit with Craig Panzano of the Somerset Hills YMCA. The YMCA offers the Adventure Program, involving New Jersey's homeless veterans in Outward Bound -type activities. These activities help participants learn how to cooperate and forge the trusting, positive relationships they need to support their recovery. The list of community partners, veterans service organizations, and state and local officials willing to make a difference in the lives of homeless veterans is long; but none of this would be possible without local commitment.

I cannot emphasize enough that these accomplishments are a direct result of this Network's commitment to forging community partnerships to develop and expand services for homeless veterans. Mr. Farsetta, the VISN 3 Director and Mr.

Mizrach, New Jersey Health Care System Director, have given their full support to these entrepreneurial projects. As a result of Mr. Farsetta's leadership, we are the only Network in the country that has a Homeless Veterans Programs Service Line. This enhances our ability to coordinate services to homeless veterans throughout the New York/New Jersey area. Its allows us to integrate outreach, treatment, employment services and transitional housing within a single organization, ensuring that homeless veterans have direct access to all services and programs in VISN 3.

Unfortunately, other areas of the country do not place priority on providing services to the homeless. After all, the problems they present are complex and often require significant resources. Homeless veterans are not well organized and make relatively few demands. However, the economic impact of not treating these veterans is significant. Studies indicate that it costs \$40,000 a year in the New York area to maintain a homeless person as they become frequent users of hospital emergency rooms and the criminal justice system. The loss of their productivity adds still more to society's economic loss. The spiritual and moral cost to these veterans and our community as a whole cannot be measured.

It is my ardent hope that the entrepreneurial spirit nourished by the leadership in VISN 3 will be replicated in other VA Networks. Ultimately, homelessness must be addressed at the local level. If local VAs take leadership in engaging their communities in creative service partnerships, we can make a meaningful impact on reducing the tragedy of homelessness among our Nation's veterans.