

## **Downing May 4, 2005 Testimony**

Chairman Boozman and members of the Committee, I am honored to be here today on behalf of the over 900 homeless veterans annually enrolled in the United Veterans Of America, Inc.(UVA) program. Each day 190 of our homeless veterans are assisted by the UVA program providing a continuum of care beginning with the treatment of trauma and mental health issues that result in substance abuse, shelter, food and other necessities, job training and counseling throughout their stay. We work in partnership with the Veteran's Administration via its per diem program.

The United Veterans of America, Inc. has one hundred and twenty veterans in transitional living on site at the VA campus in Northampton, Massachusetts. We also have sixty veterans in transitional housing residents at the Berkshire Veterans Residence in Pittsfield, Massachusetts which initially opened in September, 2004. Ten new studio apartments, funded through the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development provide permanent housing for homeless veterans with a disability, at the Pittsfield site.

The UVA serves veterans who are primarily from Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Connecticut, New York State, Vermont, & New Hampshire. The average age of a homeless veteran in our program is fifty-three. Approximately eighty-five percent of our clients have mental health/substance abuse issues, eight percent are elderly at age 70 or

older, five percent are female, more than twenty five percent are diagnosed with post-traumatic stress syndrome, twenty-eight percent are parole/probation, and forty two percent are non-white. Recently, we have begun to serve Iraq war veterans.

The VA Grant and Per Diem Program provides the core funding for our veterans' housing programs, most recently the UVA began a collaboration with the Northampton VA, to develop and intensive support services for forty chronically mentally residents and fifteen females annually, that will result in obtaining permanent housing. The UVA is a participant in two Western Massachusetts HUD funded Continuums of Care which provide additional support and operating funds for veterans at both the Northampton and Pittsfield campuses. The UVA received an HVRP Intermediaries grant of \$220,030 in 2004, to assist in employment of homeless veterans in our region. We commend the Department of Labor in its attempt to assist homeless and incarcerated veterans' re-entry to the workforce. These programs acknowledge the differences between rural and urban communities and are beginning to foster collaborations between small community and faith-based organizations and mainstream services providers.

## **United Veterans of America, Inc.**

### **Program Elements**

Integrity is at the core of the UVA's program: The integrity of its veterans, the integrity of its staff, and the integrity in its commitment to tirelessly work to improve the lives of

homeless veterans. The UVA has implemented an integrity contract which is integrated into a treatment model that promotes social responsibility. Psycho social services are augmented by employment, housing, educational and community service programs. Veterans develop self-awareness and personal grow through volunteer and supported work placements with community agencies. Veterans receive services from these agencies, yet more importantly, are given the opportunity to serve others. This enhances their self-respect, dignity and pride. The program constantly evaluates veterans' needs, and is poised to assist veterans returning from Iraq with the opportunity to self-determine their pathway to success.

### **UVA Employment Strategy**

We perceive a gap between the skills of our veterans and the resistance of some employers to hire formerly homeless veterans. This is particularly true for those veterans who may have been incarcerated. This reality has led to significant shifts in our strategies on behalf of veterans in need of employment. The UVA practices employer oriented job development. We work to understand the needs of area employers, enabling the UVA to present qualified candidates ready to work.

The UVA has partnered with the Sheriff's Office in Berkshire County, Massachusetts and the Pittsfield Community Television, in Massachusetts, to initiate a program produced, directed and filmed by formerly homeless veterans titled **Operation: Rising Star**. This

program presents to the community employment experts, candidates from our population that are ready to re-enter the workforce. This thirty minute weekly program premieres in June 2005 and includes experts from the senior government and business offices in the Northeast. We are using Department of Labor funds to assist in this exciting utilization of media technology that allow veterans' to learn new skills and experience a sense of ownership of their work.

### **UVA Business Ownership Strategy**

The UVA understands that our veterans do not necessarily seek full-time employment; therefore, creativity and flexibility are key factors in business opportunities for veterans. Two models of veteran owned businesses have been adopted. The vending operation has been converted to a veteran owned and operated business. Homeless veterans have purchased vending machines and inventory and serve our facilities. These businesses were funded with private sector funds. The United Veterans of America, Inc. is currently acquiring a "Juice and Java" franchise for two formerly homeless veterans. This business will employ two UVA owner/veterans and four to seven part-time employees.

Additionally we have been approached by area manufacturers to create an "inventory measurement service" employing homeless veterans to accommodate the seasonal and part-time nature of this segment's local business demand. As we look at the potential of the veterans we serve, we see no end to the possible solutions for improving homeless veterans' lives in a way that encourages their particular abilities and career goals.

### **UVA Skills Development and Training**

We develop individualized programs for each veteran at the UVA, which identifies the potential of each veteran and helps to stabilize their lives. These include: (1.) a personal resume development; (2.) issues related to past underemployment; (3.) definition of their personal support network, including counselors, advisors and family members; (4.) realistic career expectations; (5.) communication and presentation skills; (6.) follow up support. This UVA program ensures that each homeless veteran has access to professional help, while the veteran remains in control his/her own life decisions.

### **Changing the End of the Story**

The United Veterans of America, Inc. has accepted the challenge of President Bush to end chronic homelessness during the next ten years (2002-2012). The UVA has implemented the strategy of “Changing the End of the Story” as our response to that challenge. A safe, sober environment in a transitional housing facility is no longer acceptable as a long term solution for homeless veterans. Rather, our goal becomes safe sober permanent living facilities that allows veterans “ownership” of their own housing.

Employment and a stable income are essential to meet this goal. We have come to the conclusion that employment which is limited by disincentives and that eliminates entitlements for veterans must be re-structured. Programs that stress job readiness skills

that are sensitive to the employer community are central to our strategy and present a realistic assessment of veterans' availability to the work force. Business ownership by homeless veterans offers creative and flexible work alternatives for veterans.

As program development continues we must create systems that provide easy access for veterans in all service areas.

We are committed to work with the Department's of Veteran Affairs, Housing and Urban Development and Labor, and all interested Members and organizations to help change the end of the story for homeless veterans.

Together, we can help our homeless veterans achieve *integrity, dignity and hope*.