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Veterans Place of Washington Boulevard

July 26, 2022

Thank you, honorable senators, for allowing me time to speak today on behalf of Veterans Place of Washington Boulevard. As a previously homeless veteran and an individual who has battled substance abuse, I know too well the issues that face our great men and women who have served our country. Through my own struggles dealing with the inadequacies that exist in the mental health system, along with the homeless prevention and homeless assistance services that I navigated firsthand, it has created an opportunity for us at Veteran Place to ensure veterans in Southwestern PA don't have to face those same issues. Through my own trials and tribulations, I was able to call on values I learned from the military such as perseverance, commitment, and courage. Those values helped me to escape a life of poverty before entering the military and helped me as I experienced homelessness and addiction throughout my own transition.

During that time, it was services like those at Veterans Place that provided me the time I need to get back on my feet, helped me remember who I was, and encouraged me to move toward a life full of happiness and fulfillment that I previously only could have imagined was possible for someone like me. Through my journey I was able to go back to school, work in the recovery field and across different sectors to help improve the life of many veterans. I am living proof that all we need is a helping hand up and a chance to live a life worth living. Today I'm going to discuss the programs and benefits of Veterans Place of Washington Blvd., and like many others that will speak after me, I only can ask that you see and hear the impact firsthand that veteran programs accomplish across the commonwealth. If someone like me, who slept under bridges and was addicted to drugs, can get my life back and dedicate it to helping others be successful, with your support there is no doubt in my mind that other veterans can do the same. We are facing unprecedented issues across the commonwealth due to a number of alarming issues but none more pressing than our nation's heroes being left to sleep on the street and deemed ineligible for veterans' services through the Veterans Administration because of length of time or some other gray area of paperwork. We must work together to address the gaps in services to include veterans' eligibility to ensure that no veteran is left homeless in the great commonwealth of Pennsylvania.

We are asking assistance in the following areas of support:

1. Continue and expand funding for homeless veterans through the VTF
2. Continue and expand funding for opioid use disorder through the VTF
3. Offer funding through the state for Transitional housing, and or veteran housing specifically to help address the lack of affordable housing in southwestern PA.
4. Help expand veterans' eligibility in coordination with the Veteran Affairs.

With that, I would love to talk about what exactly Veteran place does to help our veterans here in Southwestern PA.

Mission: The mission of Veterans Place is to empower veterans' transition from homeless to home, ending the cycle of homelessness and to assist all at-risk veterans to become engaged, valuable citizens who contribute to their communities.

Vision: The vision of Veterans Place is a community where veteran homelessness is rare, brief and nonrecurring, and where they are valued, productive and respected citizens who contribute to their community.

Background:

Veterans Place of Washington Boulevard was established in 1996 by Sidney Singer, a member of the Jewish War Veterans, Post 718, to provide a safe-haven where military Veterans could continue their recovery from chronic mental illness. Mr. Singer's broader vision was to build a community for homeless veterans that would provide temporary housing and the services needed to help veterans overcome the barriers to productive, self-sufficient lives. Before the hiring of Veterans Places' first Executive Director in 2009, Veterans Place townhouses were overseen by a management company in cooperation with the VA Pittsburgh Healthcare System. In March 2020, COVID-19 brought about a world of change facing Veterans Place. Like all organizations, Covid-19 has struck and greatly impacted the service delivery, along with the financial viability of the organization. At the same time, Veterans Place previous Executive Director (ED) transitioned away from the organization. With the transition in leadership in conjunction with the Covid-19 pandemic, this created a new challenging environment internally and externally for Veterans Place. Given the above factors, the Board, and Interim Executive Director (Robert Hamilton) was forced to rethink the future of the organization and address the plan accordingly. With the help of PACE, Veterans Place was able to pivot in a time of crisis and refocus the attention of the organization by reimagining the Long-Range Strategic Plan. The organization appointed Robert Hamilton as the Executive Director in September 2020.

Need:

According to the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), in 2018, 552,830 people were homeless on any given night, approximately 37,878 were veterans. (HUD 2018 Continuum of Care Homeless Assistance Programs Homeless Populations and Subpopulations) According to The National Coalition for Homeless Veterans (NCHV) "The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) states that the nation's homeless veterans are predominantly male, with roughly 9% being female. The majority are single; live in urban areas; and suffer from mental illness, alcohol and/or substance abuse, or co-occurring disorders. About 11% of the adult homeless population are veterans. About 1.4 million other veterans, meanwhile, are considered at risk of homelessness due to poverty, lack of support networks, and dismal living conditions in overcrowded or substandard housing." (National Coalition for Homeless Veterans 2018)

In Southwestern Pennsylvania, there are 179,531 veterans. This number includes 715 homeless veterans in Allegheny County and Pittsburgh alone. According to the 2017 VA Homeless Veteran gap analysis, there are 615 homeless veterans in Allegheny County alone with another 100 homeless veterans in the other counties in the outskirts of Allegheny County (VHA Office of Mental Health 2017). With more veterans returning from Afghanistan and Iraq and transitioning out of service the growth rate will continue the previous trend over the last five years.

Participant Demographics

In 2021, Veterans Place served over 800 veterans and families with an average age of 55. Of those veterans the demographic information is as follows: Male Veterans: 82% Female Veterans: 18% Black or African American Veterans: 37% White Veterans: 40% Mixed Ethnicity Veterans: 21% Native American Veterans: 1% Asian Veterans: 1%

Programs/Services

In 2021, Veterans Place received the Three-Year Term of Accreditation by Commission on Accreditation for Rehabilitation Facilities (CARF) for Community Employment Services: Employment Supports, Job Development, Community Housing, and Service Coordination – Aspire to Excellence Accreditation. This accreditation makes Veterans Place one of the only nonprofits in southwestern Pennsylvania to have all program offerings CARF accredited. Veterans Place was recognized by the surveyors as, “committed to its mission,” and referred to as “saving lives” during stakeholder interviews. The CARF seal certifies the organization, as well as the services offered through each program at Veterans Place.

VETERANS RESOURCE CENTER: CARF Accredited for Services Coordination, our Veterans Resource Center offers veterans access to a computer lab, state-of-the-art Smart Classroom, commercial kitchen, free laundry facilities, shower facilities, and an on-site food pantry. Programs include **Female Veteran Program**, provides resources and services designed specifically for the needs of female veterans. **Opioid Response Program**, funded by the Veterans Trust Fund, as part of Governor Wolf’s response to the opioid pandemic, is one of the only opioid specific programs in the region, designed for veterans with substance use disorder. **Low Income Veterans and Families Program**, aids veterans and their families to aid in essential financial support, such as utilities, clothing, and rental assistance. **Community Case Management Program** is a VA-funded Grant and Per Diem program, which offers veterans followup case management for up to 6 months after moving into permanent housing. **Minority Veterans Program** offers minority veterans (African Americans, Asian American/Pacific Islander, Hispanic, Native American/Alaska Native and Native Hawaiian) resources such as what federal benefits they may qualify for, assistance with applying for those benefits, and referrals to other organizations and resources that will help meet the growing needs in these underserved communities.

TRANSITIONAL HOUSING: CARF Accredited for Community Housing, Veterans Place Transitional Housing is one of the only VA funded campus-style transitional housing programs in the region, offering temporary on-site housing to 48 male and female veterans. This setting creates a continuum of care, in which veterans can receive individualized services, in addition to access to all the resources offered, such as an on-site food pantry, employment services, financial literacy classes, art therapy, and much more. VP averages 6 months length of stay while 80% of veterans served through the transitional housing program moved into permanent housing and had a sustainable income at the time of discharge from program.

WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT: CARF Accredited for Community Employment Services: Employment Supports & Job Development. Homeless Veterans Reintegration Program (HVRP), Post 9/11 Employment Program and Transitioning Veteran Employment Program. The **Homeless** Veteran Reintegration Program (HVRP), funded by the Department of Labor, provides all-inclusive services for unemployed and underemployed veterans. This program assists veterans in resume building, mock interviews, connection to competitive employment, and access to job-related education and materials needed for employment. Veterans Place HVRP consistently meets and exceeds goals set by the Department of Labor and takes great pride in helping veterans secure their chosen career path. Through this program, in 2021 93 veterans were placed in sustainable employment, and 100% of veterans enrolled in the program attained sound employment, while averaging \$16.64/hour average placement wage.

COMING SOON:

Duquesne Light Company Veterans' Workforce Development Center: Duquesne Light Company and Veterans Place is excited to announce the future Duquesne Light Company Veterans' Workforce Development Center. The Center will be located on campus at Veterans Place, providing a hub for all workforce development needs of the veterans. Duquesne Light's generous support allows Veterans Place to continue to support our veterans through the expansion of our services. The Center will house the DOL HVRP program, Post 9/11 employment program, recently transitioning veterans' employment program, and the job development program

Veterans Place Multi-Purpose Living Facility: In December of 2021 the City of Pittsburgh provided clear title to 5 parcels of land adjacent to our Washington Blvd. campus. Plans are to construct a multipurpose building to provide eight (8) handicapped accessible and additional transitional housing for at-risk and homeless veterans in our community. The building will provide supportive services and a wellness center for veterans who bravely served our country.