

STATEMENT

of

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of

**Swords to Plowshares: A Veterans Rights Organization
San Francisco, California**

before the

**Committee on Veterans Affairs
United States House of Representatives**

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Agency Qualifications

Swords to Plowshares was founded in 1974 by a group of Vietnam veterans to help themselves and their peers reintegrate into civilian life. The organization's mission is to restore dignity, hope and self-sufficiency to veterans in need. To accomplish its mission, Swords to Plowshares provides direct services to help veterans gain re-entry into society and educates the public about the unmet needs of veterans. Using a vets-helping-vets approach, Swords to Plowshares tailors its services to assist veterans who are homeless, impoverished, and under- or unemployed.

An anchor agency in the community, Swords to Plowshares offers veterans assistance through a variety of innovative programs.

- The Supportive Services Unit operates a San Francisco Mental Health Outreach Clinic providing mental health counseling, income advocacy, case management and referrals to veterans.
- The Legal Services Unit provides free legal counseling and representation to homeless and low-income veterans seeking benefits and medical care from the Department of Veterans Affairs.
- The Employment Assistance and Training Unit provides job training and placement to veterans with multiple barriers to employment.
- The Residential Programs Unit offers transitional and permanent supportive housing combined with treatment and training programs at three geographically supportive sites outside of the inner city:
 - a 100-unit Veterans Academy at the Presidio, a decommissioned Army base;
 - a 56-unit Transitional Supportive Housing Program at Treasure Island, a former Navy base; and
 - 14 units at two group homes in the Balboa District, near City College of San Francisco.

Each year, Swords to Plowshares provides critical care and assistance to more than 1,200 veterans in need, most of whom first contact the organization by coming in its front door at 1063 Market Street, at the borders of San Francisco's most blighted inner-city neighborhoods, the Tenderloin and South of Market.

Mr. Chairman, I thank you for the opportunity to present our views here today. On behalf of Swords to Plowshares, a community-based veterans service provider in San Francisco, California, I speak in support of the implementation of PL107-95 Homeless Veterans Assistance Act. This legislation has the potential to eliminate homelessness among veterans as we know it now. A primary strength of the legislation is that it strengthens the community-based service delivery model – which provides successful, peer-to-peer assistance to our country's homeless and low-income veterans.

A Dramatically Under-Served Population

Each day at Swords to Plowshares we see too many veterans in need of assistance.

There are more than 2,500 homeless veterans in San Francisco.

- a majority of the veterans we serve are between the ages of 45 and 55 years old;
- more than half are Vietnam-era veterans;
- approximately 10% served during the Persian Gulf War;
- 30% served in combat;
- 55% are African American;
- 97% are male;
- more than 60% suffer from mental health disorders, including Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, schizophrenia, depression, and psychosis;
- more than 70% have substance abuse issues;
- about 50% are dual diagnosed (experience substance abuse and a mental health disorder);
- more than half have physical or mental disabilities that are permanent;
- many of those we serve face chronic health problems, such as Hepatitis C, HIV, diabetes (some related to Agent Orange exposure from Vietnam experience), heart disease, and high blood pressure; and
- many are eligible for disability benefits but have never applied or been able to follow through with the complicated and protracted application process.

These veterans have lived in marginal circumstances with little or no access to health care over a considerable period of time, causing mental health, substance abuse, chronic physical impediments and isolation to become more entrenched. Combat veterans with undiagnosed and untreated Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder continue to present themselves for treatment. With the country concluding an armed conflict, we may soon need to help another generation of war veterans – Swords to Plowshares anticipates soon providing mental health and social services for veterans returning from the Iraqi War. The current service system still cannot adequately address the needs of veterans from previous years and war eras.

In the San Francisco Bay Area, the difficulties homeless veterans experience are compounded by the high cost of living. The economy is not strong, and rental rates remain high. In fact, a room in a single-room occupancy hotel (SRO) costs \$600 a month. More than ever, agencies serving homeless persons are struggling with the extreme shortage of shelter space, low-income housing and residential treatment options.

The pressures on the homeless community in San Francisco have worsened:

- The July 2003 implementation of San Francisco's "Care Not Cash" voter initiative, which will reduce General Assistance Welfare (GA) from \$346 per month to \$59 per month plus "comparable" services, will have severe repercussions. More people will be forced into shelters, and severely mentally ill people, especially veterans who frequently do not need GA, will be displaced.
- There is heightened animosity against homeless persons. A \$65,000 billboard campaign presents homeless people as drug users and criminals. Veterans, who comprise nearly one third of the homeless population, suffer from these portrayals.

- This struggle is aggravated by severe local and state budget cuts which have resulted in cutbacks to shelter and mental health services, further threatening an already burdened system.

At Swords to Plowshares, our experience shows that with support of the community, homeless veterans can turn their lives around and live again with dignity and hope. The National Coalition for Homeless Veterans identifies a top priority for helping veterans escape homelessness is providing a coordinated effort that includes housing and meals, physical health care, substance abuse aftercare, mental health counseling and personal empowerment skills, as well job training and placement assistance. PL107-95 calls for this coordinated effort.

Increasing Residential Capacity

In San Francisco, Swords to Plowshares enjoys a strong collaborative relationship with the VA. Their effectiveness – as is Swords to Plowshares’ effectiveness – is limited by capacity.

In San Francisco, there are approximately 10,000 homeless people. Of these, approximately 3,000 are veterans. About 75% have mental health and/or substance abuse issues. This means there are close to 2,200 veterans in need of assistance in San Francisco. Yet, in San Francisco, the VA has the capacity to provide only:

- 10 social detoxification beds through the Salvation Army;
- 56 supportive housing beds (Per Diem) operated by Swords to Plowshares (In Menlo Park, CA there are approximately 100 beds); and
- 35 Section 8 housing vouchers.

Just recently, 14 contract residential treatment beds were collapsed into the 56 Per Diem units noted above. Per Diem beds do not provide the high-level support necessary for veterans suffering severe and chronic psychiatric disorders.

At the same time, the number of veterans suffering from mental health disorders and substance abuse continues to increase. Resources and programs to deal with this dual-diagnosis population are extremely limited, both in the community-based system and the VA structure. Funding reductions and health-care reorganization within the VA have dramatically reduced mental health and substance abuse treatment: hundreds of residential treatment beds have disappeared from the San Francisco VA hospital system in the past seven years. A GAO report notes that, from 1996-1998, substance abuse and inpatient care beds at the VA have been cut by 41%. Locally we know residential treatment has been cut – high-end beds for those most seriously mentally ill have been eliminated.

A local problem is that there is no individual therapy: psychiatric services within the VA do not provide individual therapy for veterans. They do offer PTSD groups and therapy around medication, but there is no individual therapy in our VISN.

With VA services limited, veterans are forced increasingly to rely on community services. Both systems are overloaded, and waiting lists can last weeks, even months. Unfortunately, many community providers believe the VA cares for all veterans. The staff at Swords to Plowshares must frequently advocate on behalf of veterans who are denied services within the San Francisco Department of Public Health due to their veteran status.

Clearly, there are not enough VA homeless assistance programs. We support this legislation because it authorizes funding of \$75 million for the **Homeless Providers Grant and Per Diem Program** and directs the Department of Veterans Affairs to ensure funding is segregated outside the VERA model. The Per Diem Program increases housing capacity by helping CBOs to provide housing that is safe, appropriate and sober – critical for veterans to have a fair chance to exit homelessness. This is a good step to increasing much-needed housing capacity. I ask the Committee to remember that Per Diem housing does not provide the high-level support needed by those veterans with severe psychiatric disorders.

HVRP – An Effective Program to Employ Veterans

For nearly 25 years, Swords to Plowshares has been San Francisco's sole community-based provider of employment assistance and training *specifically* geared toward the unmet needs of veterans. Thanks to collaborations between government entities, community-based providers and the business community, Swords to Plowshares operates a crucial access point for veterans needing employment and training assistance.

In San Francisco, veterans comprise less than 5% of those served under the Workforce Investment Act (WIA) system. This is woefully inadequate.

While we applaud DOL-VETS' recent amendment to include the homeless and veterans in WIA re-authorization, we recognize that WIA is not the ideal funding stream for a healthy CBO system. It is bureaucratic and extremely data-driven, making it very difficult for CBOs to manage the funds. In addition, the WIA system is committed to the One-Stop Centers, and specific veterans' services tend to be short-changed in the process.

In contrast the Homeless Veterans Reintegration Program (HVRP) is far more effective at helping veterans with multiple barriers to employment gain the support, skills and jobs to bring them to gainful employment. PL107-95 authorizes \$50 million for HVRP. Employment assistance specifically for veterans, HVRP recognizes that social services are critical for effective job placement, that more than just a job stands in the way to each veteran's chance for self-sufficiency. Plus, HVRP is less bureaucratically driven than WIA, allowing programs to focus their resources to the needs of the veterans.

I also ask that the Committee support incentives for federal contractors to hire veterans, as was contained in the Report of the Commission on Servicemembers and Veterans Transition Assistance. I served on this Commission. Given the scope of Homeland Security and the hiring of private military contractors through the Department of

Defense, we have an opportunity to ensure that federal contractors are “doing the right thing” and hiring veterans.

In addition, I would like you to know that we support HR1906, the Transition Assistance Program and Services Enhancement Act of 2003, which would improve servicemembers’ transition to civilian life. Employment counseling, career assistance, and veterans’ benefit guidance for recently separating and retiring servicemembers will have a significant impact on their chances for long term well-being. This legislation would encourage the military to recognize that they have a responsibility to former soldiers, and that is a good thing. The Commission on Servicemembers and Veterans Transition Assistance recognized the importance of these early interventions, and included these in its recommendations.

The VA remains an effective provider of assistance to homeless veterans. It must continue to work with and complement the services of CBOs, and it must have sufficient capacity to provide for veterans in need. We move that homeless veterans should have the highest priority within the VA health-care system, as they are without other health-care options. When homeless veterans are deprived of care, they decompensate and use costly emergency services. Screened out of other health providers due to the misconception that they are provided for by the VA, it is the individual veteran who suffers most.

Mr. Chairman, thank you for this opportunity to present our views on the above matters to you and your distinguished colleagues. Thank you for your leadership to meet the vital needs of veterans.