

**STATEMENT FOR THE RECORD  
OF  
SWORDS TO PLOWSHARES  
FOR A ROUNDTABLE OF THE  
HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES COMMITTEE ON RULES  
ON  
HUNGER AMONG VETERANS AND MILITARY FAMILIES**

**MAY 27, 2021**

Good morning Chairman McGovern, Ranking Member Cole, and distinguished members of the Rules Committee. My name is Mark Walker. I am a six-year United States Air Force veteran and Deputy Director of Swords to Plowshares (“Swords”) East Bay Office. Founded in 1974 by veterans, Swords is a community-based not-for-profit 501(c)(3) veterans service organization that provides needs assessment and case management, employment and training, housing, and legal assistance to veterans in the San Francisco Bay Area. War causes wounds and suffering that last beyond the battlefield. Swords’ mission is to heal the wounds of war, to restore dignity, hope, and self-sufficiency to all veterans in need, and to prevent and end homelessness and poverty among veterans. Our model of care is based upon the philosophy that the obstacles veterans face such as homelessness, unemployment, and disability are interrelated and require an integrated network of support within the community and continuum of care. I have been with Swords since November 2019.

Today’s topic of food insecurity is critical. California has a higher than national average of hunger for its residents. The Bay Area is one of the most expensive places in America to live. Our local food banks say that 1.5 million residents are "at risk" or experiencing hunger. Demand has doubled or even tripled among households with children. These providers have expanded and bought more food, but they say government intervention is what is needed, because food banks cannot alone carry the responsibility of long-term sustenance of the community.

In 2020, COVID-19 made it more difficult for homeless veterans to access food, due in part to the lack of community resources and services as service providers faced increased expenses and decreased funding. Even veterans housed in permanent supportive housing sites, many of whom are aging and immunocompromised, found it difficult to find adequate food due to the shutdowns and health risks posed by the virus. Swords worked relentlessly to address food insecurity faced by the veterans under our care. We strengthened our partnerships with local nonprofits to deliver nutritious meals to our veteran clients. To their credit, the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) loosened program restrictions during the crisis, giving us new ways to engage with homeless veterans by providing longer-term emergency housing and food services. For many months of the pandemic, we purchased and delivered weekly groceries to veterans scattered in temporary hotel stays across the Bay Area. We also received many generous donations from corporate and community partners, big and small, that provided prepackaged meals throughout the pandemic. Most notably, Frontline Foods, a local chapter of World Central Kitchen that partners with 40+

local restaurants, supplied over \$70,000 worth of prepackaged meals to veterans in our supportive housing programs from May to November.

Veterans make up approximately 5 percent of the population in California. When veterans cannot afford daily meals, it feels worse, because of the contract they made with America. Serving this country without condition, when veterans are most in need, resources are lacking. It's a real gut punch and very demoralizing. As an organization focusing on assisting low-income, at-risk, and homeless veterans, we see up close the need for adequate meals to sustain veterans physical and mental health. Not being able to consistently eat can lead to hopelessness and negative behavior. Veterans are a prideful group; consequently, it's very difficult for us to ask for help. So, when we do and we don't get the type of care required, it can instantly lead to mistrust and isolation.

I think there is a common belief amongst civilians that leaving the military is without much anxiety. Not true! I've been working in the veteran arena for 15 years; thus, interacting with many transitioning service members and veterans. Historically, there's been a few barriers mitigating a seamless transition.

- (1) Corporate America didn't properly value the talent exiting the military. I suppose relevant skills learned on active-duty with an emphasis on integrity, discipline, risk-assessment, servant leadership, adaptability; somehow didn't transfer to marketplace productivity.
- (2) The civilian workforce didn't accept training or credentials achieved in the military. As we know, there are cases when veterans needed to close the gap on specific requirements for licenses/certifications but starting from scratch in training created a lot of frustration and redundancy in obtaining suitable employment.
- (3) The stigma of veterans dealing with invisible wounds such as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI).
- (4) The lazy stereotype of veterans being too rigid or lacking imagination due to years of taking orders without introspection.

These attitudes are short-sided, but they led to limiting meaningful opportunities for veteran. Furthermore, service members exiting with physical and/or mental injuries add challenges to the transition as well. This situation is exacerbated when veterans don't receive quality help with their disability claims, or the VA doesn't properly adjudicate their claims. As I mentioned these historical barriers, this is not to say things haven't changed over time. Industry is coming around on valuing talent with military backgrounds. Service branches, veteran groups, and other stakeholders have been involved in forming a seamless system for integrating military skills and training into the civilian workforce. Additionally, DOD, VA, and other federal agencies made impactful changes like revamping Transition Assistance Program (TAP) and establishing Skillbridge, which should be applauded. Congress consistently funds homeless veteran programs. I've personally witnessed at-risk and homeless veterans positively affected through programs like SSVF, HUD-VASH, and HVRP. However, there's work to be done, because veterans still fall through the cracks without targeted help or knowledge of benefits earned.

While battling food insecurity among our clients, Swords' focus is on stabilizing veterans through housing. Once safe housing is settled, veterans can work on other aspects of need. Without stable housing, the journey back to self-sufficiency is almost impossible. Due to our determined work

with homeless veterans and their families, Swords understands homeless veterans need a sustained, coordinated effort that provides secure housing and nutritious meals; essential physical healthcare, substance abuse aftercare and mental health counseling; as well as personal development and empowerment. Veterans also need job assessment, training, and placement assistance. Swords believes all programs to assist homeless veterans must prioritize helping veterans reach their highest level of self-management.

We strongly believe that with the path VA has taken in eliminating veteran homelessness, and the proper utilization of the resources at the state level and in local communities, we can continue to make progress.

Thank you for the opportunity to share Swords' perspective on hunger and homelessness among veterans.

## **DEFINITION OF DOD AND HOMELESS VETERAN PROGRAMS:**

1. The HUD-VASH program combines Housing Choice Voucher (HCV) rental assistance for veterans experiencing homelessness provided by HUD with case management and clinical services provided by VA. At the local level, the HUD-VASH program operates as a collaborative effort between VA Medical Centers (VAMCs) and local Public Housing Agencies (PHAs). The VAMC identifies veterans who are eligible for the program and refers them to the PHA to receive a HUD-VASH voucher. The PHA provides the rental subsidy, and the VAMC provides case management and clinical services.
2. The Supportive Services for Veteran Families (SSVF) Program, administered by the Department of Veterans Affairs, is the only national, veteran-specific program available to help at-risk men and women veterans from ever becoming homeless. The program is also the most suitable resource for homeless veterans who can quickly transition out of homelessness into permanent housing. SSVF grantees are nonprofit, community-based organizations that provide very low-income veterans and their families with services in the following areas: health, legal, childcare, transportation, fiduciary and payee, daily living, obtaining benefits, and housing counseling. The program also allows for time-limited payments to third parties – e.g., landlords, utility companies, moving companies, and licensed child-care providers – to ensure housing stability for veteran families.
3. Administered by DOL-VETS for over two decades, HVRP served approximately 17,000 veterans in 2016, with a national placement rate into employment of 68.4 percent. These men and women find employment at an average cost to the program of \$2,007 per placement. Both the placement rate and the cost per placement represent improvements over the last several years. Please note, HVRP is the only nationwide program focused on assisting homeless veterans to reintegrate into the workforce. This program is a highly successful grant program that's fully funded at \$50 million.
4. The U.S. Department of Defense (DOD) SkillBridge program is an opportunity for service members to gain valuable civilian work experience through specific industry training, apprenticeships, or internships during the last 180 days of service. SkillBridge connects service members with industry partners in real-world job experiences. For service members SkillBridge provides an invaluable chance to work and learn in civilian career areas. For industry partners SkillBridge is an opportunity to access and leverage the world's most highly trained and motivated workforce at no cost. Service members participating in SkillBridge receive their military compensation and benefits, and industry partners provide the training and work experience. Separating Service members can be granted up to 180 days of permissive duty to focus solely on training full-time with approved industry partners after unit commander provides written authorization and approval. These industry partners offer real-world training and work experience in in-demand fields of work while having the opportunity to evaluate the service member's suitability for the work.