

Jericho Project Testimony to the New York City Council November 7, 2011

I would like to thank the New York City Council for allowing me to testify today on this important issue, and to members of the Committee on Veterans Affairs for taking time to visit Fordham Village, Jericho Project's new veterans residence, on October 18th.

I am going to speak today about Jericho Project's Veterans Initiative which will be serving more than 250 veterans and their families over the next year. I will also be talking about the pressing needs we have observed among homeless veterans.

Jericho Project Veterans Initiative

Jericho Project was founded nearly 30 years ago to provide housing and services to homeless individuals suffering from substance abuse addictions, mental illness, and other special needs. Our Veterans Initiative, started in 2006, was designed to adapt Jericho's model to meet the specific needs of homeless veterans.

This summer, Jericho Project opened Fordham Village, the first new permanent housing for veterans in the City in nearly two decades, with funding from the New York City Departments of Housing Preservation and Development and Health and Mental Hygiene. Located in the Fordham-Bedford neighborhood of the Bronx, it includes studio apartments for veterans who are homeless or at risk of homelessness, including veterans returning from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. On-site services help veterans address the invisible wounds of modern war, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and Traumatic Brain Injury; access education and employment; reunite with their families; and make the transition from military to civilian life.

A second residence, in Kingsbridge Heights in the Bronx, will be completed early next year and will follow the same model as Fordham Village. All together, Jericho has developed 132 new units of supportive housing for homeless and at-risk veterans.

Jericho has also created our Veterans Supportive Apartment Program for veterans who have HUD-VASH vouchers, which has fast tracked 50 veterans and their families into furnished apartments in all five boroughs. The program includes access to our Workforce Opportunities services preparing veterans to build skills and land jobs.

All of the programs in Jericho's Veterans Initiative apply the Jericho Model that has been successful in helping formerly homeless individuals transform their lives and achieve their greatest potential: affordable housing to provide a secure foundation; comprehensive counseling and employment assistance to prepare the individual for success, and aftercare to ensure ongoing support for independence.

Homeless Veterans' Needs in New York City

The VA has set an ambitious goal of ending veterans homelessness by 2014. They cannot do it alone, especially in these tough economic times. With President Obama's announcement that U.S. troops in Iraq will be coming home by the end of the year, we know the problem of homelessness among veterans will continue to be a challenge. In fact, a new HUD-VA study noted that while young veterans make up only 5% of the veteran population, they constitute nearly 9% of all veterans who are homeless. We cannot allow another generation of service members to become homeless.

In Jericho Project's experience, there are three main areas that need to be addressed if we are to prevent and end homelessness among veterans in New York City:

- 1. Establish a range of housing options, from permanent supportive housing to affordable housing in the community.** New York City has a great history of welcoming veterans home with housing. When Stuyvesant Town was built in the 1940s, World War II veterans were given priority which, together with resources like the GI Bill, helped establish those veterans as the "Greatest Generation". New York City needs more veteran communities. Chronically homeless veterans who are suffering from mental illness, substance abuse, and other disabilities need supportive housing with comprehensive services. Permanent supportive housing has had dramatic results in ending chronic homelessness and costs half of a bed in a City shelter. The good news is that in addition to Jericho's two new projects, there are several other supportive housing residences for veterans in development. But there are many homeless and at-risk veterans who do not qualify for supportive housing. These veterans and their families need affordable housing linked with VA and other services in the community. Without stable housing, veterans are unable to effectively address issues such as post-traumatic stress disorder, traumatic brain injuries, and military sexual trauma - all risk factors for homelessness. Veterans preferences, zoning bonuses, or other regulations can encourage the development of affordable housing for veterans.
- 2. Increase access to veterans services.** Veterans are known to be self-sufficient and sometimes ambivalent about seeking help and receiving care. While the VA offers a range of services, many homeless veterans do not access them and many are not aware of other services available in the community. To reach them, government agencies and community-based organizations need to coordinate services and work more closely together. The Mayor's Office of Veterans Affairs has a large role to play here, and it should be given the resources it needs to effectively coordinate New York City's services for veterans, especially those veterans that are disenfranchised due to homelessness, PTSD, or substance abuse.
- 3. Increase employment opportunities for homeless veterans.** Veterans are experiencing a higher unemployment rate in New York State compared to non-veterans. While many employers in the City have initiated special hiring

programs for veterans, homeless and low-income veterans continue to struggle. The City can encourage its own agencies, as well as private sector employers, to hire homeless or at-risk veterans through hiring preferences or incentives.

In a city as great as New York, no veteran should be homeless. Jericho Project, working with the Departments of Housing Preservation and Development, Health and Mental Hygiene, Homeless Services, and the Mayor's Office of Veterans Affairs has made great progress. But more needs to be done. Working together, we can make New York City a model in ending veterans homelessness.

Thank you.

Submitted by:
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