

**ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE**  
**SENATE STATE AFFAIRS STANDING COMMITTEE**

March 10, 2011  
9:32 a.m.

**MEMBERS PRESENT**

Senator Bill Wielechowski, Chair  
Senator Joe Paskvan, Vice Chair  
Senator Kevin Meyer  
Senator Catherine Giessel

**MEMBERS ABSENT**

Senator Albert Kookesh

**COMMITTEE CALENDAR**

SENATE BILL NO. 7

"An Act relating to the civil rights of felons."

- MOVED OUT OF COMMITTEE on 3/8/11

HEARING ON HOMELESSNESS AMONG VETERANS

- HEARD

**PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION**

No previous action to record

**WITNESS REGISTER**

RICK DAVIDGE, Chairman  
Alaska Veterans Foundation  
Anchorage, AK

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Presented commentary on homelessness among veterans.

TREVOR STORRS, Co-chair  
Anchorage Coalition on Homelessness  
Anchorage, AK

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Presented commentary on homelessness among veterans.

SUSAN BOMALASKI, Executive Director  
Catholic Social Services

Anchorage, AK

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Presented commentary on homelessness among veterans.

**ACTION NARRATIVE**

[9:32:38 AM](#)

**CHAIR BILL WIELECHOWSKI** called the Senate State Affairs Standing Committee meeting to order at 9:32 a.m. Present at the call to order were Senators Giessel, Paskvan, Meyer, and Chair Wielechowski.

**Homelessness Among Veterans**

[9:34:23 AM](#)

Chair Wielechowski announced the committee would hold a hearing on homelessness among veterans. Presenters will discuss the challenges of meeting the needs of homeless veterans in Alaska.

RICK DAVIDGE, Chairman, Alaska Veterans Foundation (AVF), said it is time to look at what role the state should play in ending homelessness among veterans in Alaska. The Secretary of Veterans Affairs and the President last year launched a five-year initiative to end homelessness for veterans. This could provide an opportunity for the state to leverage some federal funds. He said he had given committee members an outline of key questions; the number of homeless veterans in Alaska is uncertain, but there are probably 80 to 100 in the Anchorage area at any given time.

The Department of Veterans Affairs reports that about 600 homeless veterans live in Alaska, but this number is based on a formula, not on actual information. Anchorage has the largest homeless population in the state. The mayor's leadership team is looking at the overall problem. The federal, state, and local governments spend billions of dollars each year trying to solve the homeless problem. Governments have done a pretty good job of building transitional housing. The majorities of people who become homeless receive services, get out of the system, and don't come back. About 20 percent become the chronic homeless. A large number of veterans are in that group.

[9:38:46 AM](#)

Of the homeless deaths in Anchorage in the last two years, 25 percent were veterans, yet veterans only make up eight percent of the overall population. Professionals say that the high numbers of homeless veterans are due to mental health problems,

such as post-traumatic stress and traumatic brain injuries, combined with the tendency to self medicate in order to deal with pain. This leads to chronic alcohol or drug use.

The Domiciliary is a VA transitional housing program and treatment center. They do a very good job and have dramatically improved their success rate in Anchorage over the last three years. Clients can spend as long as a year in their program. After they finish the program, many are still unable to care for themselves and end up coming back three or four months later. This is why the AVF is putting forward the idea of long term supportive housing. Long term supportive housing is very simple. It is a place that is warm and safe which provides some kind of structured assistance, with nationally accredited Veterans Service Officers on site.

One proposal in the AVF's package, called "VetCity," deals with a group of 28 cabins located on property that AVF is trying to acquire. There is no limit on how long clients can stay but they do have to work and make a contribution to the cost of the facilities. Housing First is just getting started in Anchorage. This is the most effective way to get the chronic homeless off the streets and begin to provide services for them. The combination of a Housing First type program and long term supportive housing would create an effective way to get homeless veterans off the street.

Many say the issue of homeless veterans is a federal problem. If a veteran has a service connected disability that is true. But mental disabilities are not always immediately evident. Many veterans have problems with post traumatic stress, and still have difficulty accessing services from the VA. Mr. Davidge asked, "What is the role of the state?" The state could help fill the funding gap for the VetCity and Housing First projects.

9:44:19 AM

TREVOR STORRS, Co-chair, Anchorage Coalition on Homelessness, said that Housing First and VetCity are two very important projects. Project Homeless Connect serves about 650-700 each year; approximately 15 percent of them are veterans. The veterans fall into two groups: chronic inebriates, and families who have veteran status. In the area of chronic homeless inebriates, the number one national best practice is Housing First. It is not about drinking or not drinking. It is about housing. People can't address their substance abuse issues until they have housing. It has been hugely successful in the lower 48. Alaska is part of the U.S. and we are very much the same.

Housing First can be successful here. AHFC is a big component, but they need more dollars.

Families are the second part. Many of the armed services families use the food bank and other social services even while they are in the service. After leaving the military these families often end up homeless. Because they have been stationed far from home, they don't have families to double up with. Many access shelter programs. The state needs more affordable housing. The cost of living is a huge factor. In Anchorage a person needs to make just under \$19 an hour, working 40 hours a week, to afford a two bedroom apartment. Unless they have two earners, low wage families are barely making it. Most low-income veteran families struggle and are unable to access or maintain any type of housing.

Providing affordable housing is the biggest role the state can play. Capital project funding and helping to build affordable housing would provide employment in the state. Affordable housing reduces crime, increases school attendance, and improves the overall health of the community.

[9:49:37 AM](#)

Another thing the state could do is create a voucher program for housing subsidies; however, a voucher is not helpful if there is no housing available.

SENATOR GIESSEL asked what the recidivism rate is for the Domiciliary.

MR. DAVIDGE replied they tried to get that figure but the VA doesn't keep numbers. For the most part, supportive services are provided by the VA. Facilities are the biggest problem, not services.

SENATOR PASKVAN asked what the number of homeless veterans in Anchorage is, and do we have the numbers for other regions of the state.

[9:52:19 AM](#)

SUSAN BOMALASKI, Executive Director, Catholic Social Services, said there are high numbers of veterans at the Brother Francis shelter. Last year 524 of the 3,100 clients at the Brother Francis Shelter were veterans. Many of them are working but can't move out because they can't find affordable housing. Anchorage has the highest percentage of veterans per capita in Alaska. In 2009 the Point in Time Count showed there were 259

homeless veterans in Anchorage. The Alaska Homeless Management Information System reports 450 individuals, and 42 veteran head of household families. Information from AHFC shows the total number of very low income veterans is 285 families who live in public housing or have a voucher.

Another 313 families are at risk of homelessness because they can't get a voucher. According to the 2009 American Community Survey, there are 1,353 veteran family members in Alaska living below the poverty line and at risk of homelessness due to the lack of affordable housing. Supportive services are available for veterans, but not for their family members.

[9:56:05 AM](#)

Catholic Social Services has recently applied for a new grant which will help to serve veteran families with children as well as individual veterans. Long term permanent housing is the top unmet need. In terms of what the state can do to help, affordable housing is at the top of the list. Supportive housing for individual veterans is important; augmenting supportive services are also essential. Catholic Social Services has asked for two case managers to manage 50 families. This program provides rental subsidies for only 6 months; then the families will be on their own. One-on-one case management and supportive services is the key to success for these families.

SENATOR PASKVAN asked about the numbers of homeless veterans statewide, and what regions they are in.

[10:00:30 AM](#)

MR. DAVIDGE said there are varying definitions of homeless veterans. The AVF is struggling to define who and where they are. This is something the state could help with, in terms of predevelopment work for housing projects. Many times the numbers are run by formulas instead of actual counts. The rescue Mission in Fairbanks is very active in looking at this problem.

In the VA program, there is a HUD voucher program which is only available to veterans. There are also grants which pay 65 percent of the cost of construction. This is a way of leveraging state strategy to bring in federal dollars. Nationally Accredited Veterans' Service Officers can help veterans to access services and benefits and steer them towards available social services.

[10:03:05 AM](#)

SENATOR PASKVAN said he is trying to understand the magnitude of the homeless veteran problem on a state-wide basis.

MS. BOMALASKI answered there 259 homeless vets in all of Alaska, and 145 in Anchorage. That was from the Point in Time count in 2010. So Anchorage has over half the homeless veteran population.

MR. DAVIDGE noted when AVF members go to the homeless camps they find many homeless veterans who have come to Anchorage from other parts of the state hoping to receive services.

10:05:39 AM

CHAIR WIELECHOWSKI said his staff will try to obtain more statewide data.

SENATOR GIESSEL asked if the presenters had any cost figures for a homeless veteran in Anchorage, and what the savings would be if that person was in a Housing First type program.

MR. STORRS said there is no formal study in Alaska, but in Seattle the costs range from \$100,000-\$150,000 per person per year if they are chronically homeless. In the Housing First project, the cost is \$25,000-\$30,000. The state doesn't actually start seeing money, but the resources don't have to grow as quickly. Social services can be focused in other areas. This slows growth in spending. Emergency rooms aren't flooded; the police have more time; people access better support services and start giving back to the community. Some are able to pay back restitution. All of this leads to a healthier community.

10:09:05 AM

SENATOR GIESSEL said she understands that Anchorage City Church is a partner with the city of Anchorage. She noted the increase in the number of single mothers who are homeless veterans, and asked if the church is housing them.

MS. BOMALASKI responded City Church has launched its program for single mothers (called Beacon Hill) and it is full. She is not sure how many are veterans, but she could find out. City Church is also helping with the emergency cold weather plan for homeless families with children. She said she would get numbers for the committee.

MR. DAVIDGE said a growing number of female veterans are becoming divorced within 18 months of separation from the service; this is accelerating the homeless problem.

MS. BOMALASKI responded the new supportive service for families grant would help.

10:10:59 AM

CHAIR WIELECHOWSKI asked what two or three things the legislature or the state could do this year to help solve the veteran homeless problem.

MR. DAVIDGE replied there is currently an opportunity to leverage state funding with federal funding. The AVF is encouraging the state to step forward. AVF has put together a \$300,000 pre-development study which develops in full all of the needed facilities in the Anchorage area. This sets up a five-year financial sustainability plan which enables the facilities to be built and maintained. There is a lot of federal money available right now for the needs of veterans. If the state will participate as a partner, veterans' organizations can leverage other grants.

MR. STORRS noted in addition to the project described by Mr. Davidge, the state can look at how to better utilize AHFC to help. The state takes a lot of money from AHFC and puts it into the general fund. The state needs to promote developers building affordable housing, and AHFC can help with that.

MS. BOMALASKI said with the two percent vacancy rate and high wages required for fair market rent, there is almost no affordable housing available. She also mentioned the need for supportive services.

10:14:07 AM

There being no further business to come before the committee, Chair Wielechowski adjourned the Senate State Affairs Standing Committee meeting at 10:14 a.m.