

VA kills plan to cut homeless-vet program after outcry

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Veterans Affairs Secretary David Shulkin has killed a plan to shift money from a major homelessness program in response to a wave of protest from veterans' advocates, who said the move would aggravate conditions for chronically ill and vulnerable vets.

Advocates for veterans, state officials and even officials from HUD, which co-sponsors the \$460 million program, had attacked the decision, saying the service has helped dramatically reduce homelessness among veterans. After POLITICO published a story about their anger, Shulkin reversed course late Wednesday.

"There will be absolutely no change in the funding to support our homeless program," he said in a news release, adding that the money would not be shifted to the Choice program, which enables veterans to get health care outside the VA system.

Shulkin promised to get input from local VA leaders and others "on how best to target our funding to the geographical areas that need it most."

The announcement came after a confusing week of messaging from the VA. On Nov. 27, Shulkin and HUD Secretary Ben Carson appeared at a Washington shelter to tout President Donald Trump's commitment to ending veteran homelessness.

Then on Dec. 1, Shulkin's staff told advocates on a phone call that the agency was ending the program--one of two major VA homelessness projects-- and funneling the money to local VA hospitals that could decide how to use it. The original VA decision was buried in a September circular without prior consultation with HUD or veterans' groups.

A person involved with the program said the decision to cut it was made with no input from rank-and-file VA or HUD staff and surprised even employees at the VA.

Shulkin's reversal also came after HUD on Wednesday released its annual survey showing a 1.5 percent increase in veteran homelessness over 2016 — the first rise since 2010. Most of the jump occurred in Los Angeles, where housing costs are skyrocketing.

Sen. Patty Murray (D-Wash.), who sits on a veterans' affairs subcommittee, had called the earlier VA decision "a new low" for the Trump administration that was "especially callous and perplexing" in view of the latest data on homelessness.

Murray and the 13 other members of the Senate Appropriations Military Construction-VA Subcommittee had asked the VA to reconsider its decision.

HUD data show there were nearly 40,000 homeless veterans in 2016, and even those with housing still need assistance. The program has reduced the number of displaced service members, serving 138,000 since 2010, and cut the number without housing on a given day by almost half. More than half the veterans housed are chronically ill, mentally ill or have substance abuse problems.

They can easily lose their housing again and need VA case managers to mediate with landlords, pay bills, and help them access the agency's services and jobs, said Matt Leslie, who runs the housing program for the Virginia Department of Veterans Services.

"The people in this program are the most vulnerable individuals," Leslie said. "If someone's going to die on the streets, they are the ones."

Veteran and homeless advocates were infuriated by the VA's original decision.

"I don't understand why you are pulling the rug out," Elisha Harig-Blaine, a National League of Cities housing official who was on last Friday's call, said in an interview afterward. "You're putting at risk the lives of men and women who've served this country."

"The VA is taking its foot off the pedal," said Leon Winston, an executive at Swords to Plowshares, which helps homeless vets in San Francisco, where he said the VA decision is already having an impact. HUD recently put up 100 housing vouchers for veterans in the program, but the local VA hospital said it could only provide support for 50.

Agency spokesman Curtis Cashour said Tuesday that the move gave VA medical centers more flexibility to "ensure resources go where they best align with veterans' needs."

The decision would have affected \$265 million immediately and \$195 million more under the VA's 2018 budget. Under the program, HUD offers housing vouchers for veterans, and the VA provides case management — finding them apartments and making sure they stay there.

At the Nov. 27 event, Shulkin and Carson said Trump was increasing funding for veterans homelessness. They promised to help every veteran find a home.

When asked about the administration's budget, which still includes no additional vouchers for the hard-case veterans, Carson said HUD had "excess vouchers. When we use those, we'll look for more," he said.

"The old paradigm of dumping money on problems doesn't work," Carson added.

Some communities have excess vouchers, but many more don't have enough, said Harig-Blaine, who is also a member of Shulkin's advisory committee for homelessness. Even in cities where there are excess vouchers, they exist only because the voucher community can't compete with private market rents, he said — not because there aren't homeless veterans there.

Advocates had said cuts to the homelessness program would be doubly foolish because the chronically homeless veterans it serves typically cost cities and the health care system hundreds of thousands of dollars for emergency room visits, ambulance runs and jailings that could be avoided if the veterans were reasonably sheltered.

"These are the kinds of veterans it deals with," said Kathryn Monet, CEO of the National Coalition for Homeless Veterans.

Renuka Rayasam contributed to this report.