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House of Representatives

VETERANS' HOUSING OPPORTUNITY AND BENEFITS IMPROVEMENT ACT OF 2006

HON. BOB FILNER

OF CALIFORNIA
IN THE HOUSE OF
REPRESENTATIVES

Mr. FILNER. Mr. Speaker, I thank the gentleman for yielding me time, and I thank Mr. *Miller* of Florida.

I rise in strong support of this Veterans' Housing Opportunity and Benefits Improvement Act that is before us. This is bipartisan legislation and includes several provisions introduced by both Democrats and Republicans. It demonstrates what can be accomplished when we work together to deliver the best to our Nation's veterans, and again, I thank Chairman *Miller* and all the Members on his side for bringing to us this bipartisan legislation.

One of the most important parts of the bill is the reauthorization of appropriations for the Labor Department's Homeless Veterans Reintegration Program (HVRP), through fiscal year 2009 with a maximum level of \$50 million per year. This program has proven to be very successful in providing job training and other services that help our Nation's veterans get back into productive lives.

Mr. Speaker, together with the ranking member, Mr. *Evans*, I convened a homeless veterans forum just last Thursday, May 18. We

heard some very tough statistics, hard-to-hear statistics about our Nation's veterans. Each night as many as 200,000 veterans are sleeping in a doorway, under a bridge, in an alley, in a box, in a barn or a car or homeless shelter. In fact, one out of every three homeless males is a veteran, most of those from Vietnam. A hard-to-believe fact is that the number of homeless Vietnam-era veterans is greater, Mr. Speaker, than the number of service members who died during that war. This is almost unbelievable, and Congress must renew efforts to fight this plague.

Women veterans, unfortunately, are also joining the ranks of the homeless. According to the National Coalition for Homeless Veterans, a survey of their members revealed that the percentage of women among homeless vets rose from 2 percent in 1966 to 7 percent at the end of 2005. Women who have served in the military are up to four times more likely to become homeless when compared with their peers in the general population. These statistics demonstrate the importance of passing S. 1235.

At the forum last week, we heard from a woman veteran, formerly homeless. Her story is one of a courageous person who fought for years

to overcome the problems that kept her homeless. At the Mary E. Walker House on the grounds of the VA Coatesville Medical Center in Pennsylvania, she finally was able to get the assistance she needed to reestablish her life, regain her children and begin again. While testifying, tears came to her eyes. She said they were tears of joy at what the VA program had helped her accomplish.

We heard also about the success of the Stand Downs, which began in my home town of San Diego in 1988 and provide a one-stop 3-day event to provide all the services needed by homeless vets; that is, counseling, clothing, food, medical and dental, assistance with job applications.

We know how to help our vets. We have to bring together all these services in one place. And rather than have 3-day Stand Downs around the country, we ought to have these services available to our veterans' everyday. In addition, the Homeless Court Program, which began a few years ago, brings the court to homeless shelters to assist homeless defendants in resolving outstanding cases that prevent them from getting jobs and moving forward.

I would also like to call attention to another important successful program not in this bill before us today, the VA Homeless Grant and Per Diem program which directs funding to providers of housing and traditional services for homeless vets. I believe this program should be given an authorized annual spending level of \$130 million for the next 5 years. This would mean that the funding level would increase each year to reach by increments the \$130 million level.

Our colleagues on the Appropriations Committee have authorized this program through September of 2007. I suggest our committee take steps to continue the authorization of this program through 2012.

Mr. Speaker, we have heard of other important components of this bill, improvements in employment, life and health insurance, adapted housing, and housing loans to Native American veterans. I would like to thank Chairman *Buyer*, Ranking Member *Evans*, and the chairman and ranking members of the subcommittees and their staff who diligently worked to make this bill a reality. I urge the passage of this bill.