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Before the House Committee on Human Services and Housing
Hearing on HB 2417
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Testimony of Charles W. Hemingway
Co-Chair, Housing & Construction Committee
Central Oregon Veterans Outreach

Good afternoon Chair Tomei and members of the Committee.

My name is Chuck Hemingway with Central Oregon Veterans Outreach (COVO). Our nonprofit organization has since 2005 provided assistance to veterans and their families who are either imminently in danger of becoming homeless, or if they are homeless, helped them get rapidly re-housed.

Because of what we are seeing in Central Oregon regarding the serious housing issues that veterans in our area face, HB 2417 is a critically important piece of legislation.

HB 2417 will complement a comprehensive program that COVO has developed and implemented in Central Oregon that allows us to take a homeless veteran from a tent to a permanent home. Our program was created precisely because of the problems that we are currently seeing in Central Oregon and that HB 2417 will address. Let me explain.

Under our housing program we can take a veteran living in a tent or car into an emergency transitional housing program called VETS (Veterans Emergency Transitional Services) that we operate under a contract with the VA at Bethlehem Inn, a local homeless shelter. They can stay there 3 months while we work on other housing options. We then have a transitional housing program that we call "Home of the Brave" where they can stay 2 years while we work with them on clearing up that wreckage on the road that lead to their being homeless in the first place. We then have 17 units of permanent supportive housing in Bend, LaPine, Madras and Prineville that they can move into where we still provide them with case management services so that the problems they encountered that made them homeless do not recur. And as we speak, we are working with the City of Bend Affordable Housing Department and several local nonprofits to assist two veterans in our Housing Program to purchase homes of their own. These veterans, once homeless, are now stabilized, contributing members of society, and ready to move into home ownership.

This is exactly what HB 2417 will accomplish. The Emergency Housing Account that it will establish will assist in preventing veteran homelessness or assist in rapidly rehousing a veteran who is now homeless. Every one of the 17 units that we currently have available are now filled and we have a waiting list of applications from more than 35 veterans for 6 units that we are currently renovating and that will be available in May 2013. So the General Housing Account that HB 2417 will fund will provide funds for development of new housing for veterans or the acquisition and renovation of existing housing stock to house veterans. And the funds that will be set aside under HB 2417 to assist veterans into homeownership are an important final piece of this legislation.

No longer are we seeing just the Vietnam era veterans who are struggling to find affordable housing in Central Oregon. Increasingly we are seeing the younger Post 9/11 Global War on Terrorism (GWOT) and Iraq and Afghanistan veterans who struggle to find jobs, provide for themselves or their families and who struggle to find housing they can afford. Our COVO Supportive Service program that Rich manages, which we only began in October 2012, less than 5 months ago, has already responded to more than 90 request for assistance in Central Oregon alone, and we project that by the time this program has been in operation for a year, we will have had more than 200 requests for assistance.

As a Vietnam era veteran myself, and having seen what the veterans returning from Vietnam experienced, we owe it to the increasing number of younger veterans we are seeing to not let the same thing happen to them. So we strongly urge passage of HB 2417.

Thank you for your attention and we will be happy to answer any questions.