

Sandra Strickland, US Army Veteran

Statement of Sandra Strickland  
Before the  
Senate Committee on Veteran's Affairs

March 14, 2012

Thank you for the opportunity to share my journey to homelessness. I hope that through my shared experience, it will enlighten society's perspective of what homelessness "looks" like, give a voice to this silent epidemic that plagues our society, and spark an urgency to end homelessness by developing a process to empower a homeless person with the resources and assistance that they need, instead of providing quick-fix remedies that only enable their homelessness.

My name is Sandra Strickland. I was born in Gulfport, MS and I am a homeless 43 year-old African-American female, Army Veteran. I currently reside in Fairfax, Virginia in a transitional home operated by Final Salute, Inc....a non-profit organization whose mission is to provide homeless female Veterans with safe and suitable housing. I am a mother of 4 wonderful children ages 22, 21, 8, and 6, and I am currently separated from my spouse, who is also an Army Veteran.

I joined the Army after graduating high school in June 1986, and was sent to Ft. Jackson, SC to complete Basic Training, as well as Advanced Individualized Training (AIT) for the Administrative Assistant (71L). Upon completion of AIT, I went to my first duty station in Kitzingen, Germany and served as my company's Personnel Administration Center (PAC), and later as the Executive Secretary for the Battalion Commander, who personally requested that I be assigned to this position. After leaving Germany, I was stationed at Ft. Hood, TX where I was assigned to the Transportation Motor Pool and assisted in the deployment of soldiers going to and returning from Operation Desert Storm.

In January 1990 I processed out of the Army and received an Honorable Discharge. With the skills and training that I acquired from the Army, I set out to live the American dream and become a business owner. Life happened along the way and in November 2002 I met and married my husband. We talked about opening up an auto repair shop together, but about 4 months after we were married, he was called back to active duty to assist in training the soldiers who were being sent to Iraq and Afghanistan, and was stationed at Ft. Bragg, NC while I stayed at our home in Stafford, VA. In 2006, my spouse was released from active duty and when he returned home, we opened up our auto repair shop in January 2007. Our marriage suffered because of the separation, among other things, and we continued to grow apart and eventually talked about divorce.

Two days before Christmas of 2010, when my spouse picked up our children from school and preparatory academy, he made a verbal threat to the Academy Director that he was going to kill me and the kids. That was the day that I took my kids and left, and ended up living in a domestic violence shelter with my two younger children in tow (ages 6 and 4 at the time). At the time I was working as a temp on a Government contract so I managed to save enough money to move

me and my children into a 1 bedroom w/den apartment in February 2011. Everything was going great until I walked into work on Monday, April 25, 2011 and was told that the contract that I was working on was ending and Friday, April 29, 2011 would be my last day.

I became unemployed on April 29, 2011 and despite being a Veteran, going on countless interviews and submitting countless resumes, and having a wealth of administrative experience, I remained unemployed until September 2011. Although I received unemployment compensation for a brief time, my finances became depleted and the eviction notices started coming. Also during this time I was dealing with custody issues for my children. Although the court awarded joint custody to me and my spouse, I was awarded temporary physical custody until such time as we went to court for the final custody hearing. That hearing took place and although we both maintained joint custody, the judge reversed the order and awarded physical custody to my spouse because he still had the marital home that our children grew up in which was in their best interest to stay there, and because my apartment was out of their current school district, it wouldn't be in their best interest to transition them to a new school for the upcoming school term. Not only was I in shock by the decision, I felt as though I was being victimized because I chose to take my children and leave an unhealthy environment, regardless of the fact that we were homeless. Not only did I lose physical custody of my children, I eventually ended up losing my apartment because I couldn't afford to pay the rent, due to the lack of funds from being unemployed and not having a full-time job.....so now, I am homeless and have been reduced to a "every other weekend" mother because my children no longer live with me every day.

Although I don't have a college degree, I have over 20+ years of experience in the administration field, obtained from my many years of on the job training in the non-profit, government and association sectors, entertainment and media industry, working in positions as a CEO, CFO, Executive Secretary, Office Manager, Business Owner, Administrative Assistant, Grants Administrative Lead, Receptionist, Overnight stocker...just to name a few. That, coupled with being a military Veteran, has yet to open up any doors for a full-time job or have an employer offer me a full-time job because I am a Veteran.

When I received my first eviction notice, I reached out to the Department of Veterans Affairs for financial assistance and assistance with obtaining full-time employment. When I spoke to one of their representatives on the telephone, their concern wasn't about my possible homelessness or unemployment, the representative was more concerned with my mental capacity....did I feel that I was mentally stable with everything that I had going on. She suggested that I come to the VA Office in DC to get registered into their system and be evaluated. Furthermore, I was told that they did not have any more vouchers for housing and the best that they could do was provide me with a list of shelters for me and my children to go to if we did become homeless. As for assisting me with employment, I was told to go to the unemployment office and file a claim for unemployment. I hung up the telephone feeling hopeless. The one organization that I thought I would at least get some temporary assistance from was only worried about my mental capacity and didn't go above and beyond to address my current needs.

I was able to get rental assistance from a local organization in Stafford, VA and Final Salute, Inc., as well as receive public assistance. However that was just a band-aid because I knew that if I didn't get a job soon, I would be faced with eviction again, and ultimately homelessness. I

started working for a Temp Agency in September 2011, however because I owed so much in arrears for rent, there was no way that I could catch up with the salary that I was bringing in. The owner of Final Salute, Inc. called me a week before Thanksgiving 2011 to follow-up with me to see how things were going with me and I told her that I was in the eviction process again and would ultimately be facing homelessness. She made me aware of the transitional home that she had just opened that month and let me know that there was an opening there if I wanted to move in. I met with her a few days later for an interview and the day before Thanksgiving 2011 I moved into the Final Salute, Inc. transitional home. I call it a transitional home because I've lived in a shelter and this home is nothing like a shelter....it is my HOME. It is a 2-year program that allows me the opportunity to get back on the path of self-sufficiency and independence, and at the conclusion of the program, I will be given assistance to obtain a home of my own. During the 2-year stay, I am required to adhere to an individualized goal plan, provided with resources and support to help me achieve my goals. One of my goals is to own and operate an auto repair shop that is female-owned and operated. I also have an Administration/Consulting business that I started in 2009 that I am working on getting up and operational. To assist me with those goals of entrepreneurship, Final Salute, Inc. sponsored me to attend the V-Wise Conference that just took place in Orlando, FL. I am very thankful for the Final Salute, Inc. program and honestly, it has been my saving grace. Unfortunately, there are not enough programs such as Final Salute, Inc. whose focus is on preventing homelessness among female veterans and not just providing a band-aid remedy.

Federal grants and resources are being given to well established organizations, and the newly formed and unknown organizations such as Final Salute, Inc. are overlooked, and to me that is a travesty. Money is being poured into these other organizations, however some of these organizations are not addressing the core issue of a person's reason for being homeless. Instead of helping, they are enabling them to remain a product of the homelessness cycle, and the funds are not being used to provide assistance and resources for the homeless person. I can speak first hand from an experience that I encountered while living in the domestic violence shelter. During that time it was winter and the blankets that they provided for the residents beds were very thin. On one particular day, I had to clean out the storage pantry and saw that they had an abundance of NEW comforter sets still in their original package. I was beside myself. Here we are freezing at night and there are NEW comforter sets just sitting in the pantry not being used! Mind you, there was a problem with the heating system so they could only set the thermostat to 70 degrees...you would think that with the funds they were receiving, they would have gotten the heating system fixed! That night, I asked the Night Resident Manager if I could get a heavier blanket for my children because the temperature had dropped to the low 20's that night, and instead of going into the pantry to give me a couple of the comforter sets, she gave me three small child-sized "blankees". I asked her about the NEW comforter sets in the pantry and I was told that they were being used for something else? Really? What else could they be used for other than for the residents in the house was the inside question I asked myself.

This is one of the reasons why women that are homeless would prefer to stay homeless because of the treatment received within the shelters...shelters that are meant to help, but end up doing more harm than good. Once someone is processed into the shelter, they are made to feel like a child and although I understand policy, procedures and rules, we shouldn't be treated like we are prisoners. We already feel dehumanized because we are homeless, and the added stress and

dictatorship doesn't make it any better. As a woman with children, I would suffer that type of treatment just so that my children could have a roof over their heads, but if it were just me, the shelter would not be my preference to live and I would seek out other means to survive, as do most homeless women. While in the shelter, you are not asked what your goals are, what is it that you want to do...you are given resources to go to, with no real guidance. You are told what you have to do, and sometimes how you have to do it. No individualized care or concern for the homeless person.

The Department of Veteran Affairs will not be able to end homelessness as a sole organization. It is going to require the affiliation with organizations such as Final Salute, Inc. coming together and creating partnerships, so as to provide the small, unknown organizations access to the funds and resources needed that will enable them to have viable and thriving programs that are addressing the CORE needs of the homeless and curing the epidemic. The needs of a homeless person have to be discovered first, and then devise an individualized plan that will address the needs and put them on a path to self-sufficiency so that they aren't a repeat case, or a product of society.

When I lived in the domestic violence shelter, I went to work everyday and it wasn't until a situation happened where I couldn't go in to work one day that I had to tell my supervisor what my situation was. She was taken aback and could not believe that I was homeless because I didn't fit society's "picture" of what homelessness "looks" like. I am what homelessness looks like, but I am inspired every day because I am blessed to be in a program that uplifts, encourages and empowers. I am not an alcoholic, I am not strung out on drugs, I don't have mental health issues, nor do I have any health disabilities. I am a very healthy woman, who is a mother, a business woman who dresses in business suits (name brand suits when I used to be able to afford to do so), who has over 20+ years of experience in the administration industry, who is a striving entrepreneur who started two businesses of her own, who is a military veteran.....according to society, I am not supposed to be homeless.....but I am, not by choice but by circumstances.