

# “For Such a Time as This” Pray. Fast. Act.

## SUPPORT FOR VETERANS & FAMILIES

Throughout the country, faith-based hospitals, long-term care providers, houses of worship and other religious organizations provide critical connections and services for veterans returning to civilian life. This tradition is often grounded in Jesus’ healing ministry. In the Lutheran context, many ELCA ministers have long served as chaplains in medical centers and in uniform around the world, including the mission [“to carry out a Word and Sacrament ministry to those who otherwise may not experience the presence and support of a faith community.”](#) In addition to direct service, engagement and community education, advocacy for veterans is a critical way in which people of faith can raise support in local communities.

There have been some praiseworthy policy gains for U.S. veterans in recent years. Through newly enacted changes, [more veterans are accessing health care through the Department of Veterans Affairs \(VA\)](#) than ever before. In 2017, Congress also reauthorized and expanded GI Bill education benefits by \$3 billion and offered [substantial funding for veteran programs](#) in the annual spending bill. But for all these advances, many veterans still face serious, often hidden, challenges that fail to garner national attention and headlines.

It is clear that each returning service member has unique needs, ranging from education goals to a broad spectrum of mental and physical health needs. The Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) estimates that [approximately 40,000 veterans struggle with homelessness on any given night](#). Veterans are also nearly “twice as likely as non-veterans to die from accidental overdoses of the highly addictive painkillers,” according to [Reuters](#), and continue to be especially hard hit by the opioid epidemic ravaging our communities. After almost two decades of fighting in Iraq, Afghanistan and anti-terror operations around the world, a new generation of veterans brings an urgent need to strengthen funding for veteran services.

While there are many programs in the federal budget that are critical to assisting the work of pastors, chaplains and congregations active in veteran affairs, here are some that are timely to raise in such a time as this:

### FUNDING THE DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS

The VA provides a wide range of benefits specially designed for veterans, including but not limited to: medical care, disability compensation and pensions, education, employment services, home loans, traumatic injury protection insurance and many other services for members returning to civilian life. Supporting strong topline numbers for the VA ensures agencies have the resources they need to provide essential services. It is also often important for veterans to receive services from the VA because civilian providers lack expertise in many of their unique health needs.

### VETERANS AFFAIRS SUPPORTIVE HOUSING (VASH)

[HUD-VASH](#) provides permanent supportive housing for veterans struggling with homelessness. This program is extremely effective, with some reports finding that HUD-VASH has a [one-year cost savings of approximately \\$6,000 per participant](#) on health services and other positive outcomes. While there has been a steady decrease in veteran homelessness since 2010, more needs to be done.



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### THE OPIOID RESPONSE

In 2017, the administration officially named opioids a public health emergency and commissioned a nationwide system of easier access to alternatives to opioids for people in pain. But pursuing further initiatives—particularly in addressing the unique needs of veterans—has garnered limited attention in Congress. More must be done to incentivize federal innovation and investment in addressing the needs of communities.

### WHAT CAN YOU DO?

Congregations can play important roles in direct engagement. Hosting local events, such as 12-step recovery groups, are often an essential and much-needed service in communities. Many sponsored events invite those in recovery to bring their faith in God as a higher power into their healing and helping others, and houses of worship often serve as a place of centering and community. Find training videos and resources for clergy and churches interested in engagement [on the VA webpage](#), and ELCA-specific resources for pastors and chaplains at [ELCAchaps.com](#).

#### FOR FURTHER READING:

*Welcome to Congregations Support for Federal Ministries*

<https://elcachaps.com>

*VA Resources for Clergy and Faith Communities*

<https://www.mirecc.va.gov/mentalhealthandchaplancy/community.asp>

*VA National Center for PTSD Clergy Toolkit*

<https://www.ptsd.va.gov/professional/toolkits/clergy/pastoralReferral.asp>

*VA Office of Mental Health Services: Overview of Substance Use Resources*

<https://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/substanceabuse.asp>

