March 22, 2019

Assemblymember Jacqui Irwin
Chair, Assembly Committee on Veterans Affairs
1020 N Street, Room 389
Sacramento, CA 95814

Re: Support for AB 761 — Streamlining Armories as a Tool to Reduce Homelessness

Dear Chair Irwin,

On behalf of the Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority (LAHSA), we write in support of Assembly Bill 761 (AB 761), which would sharply reduce barriers to using state-owned armories as life-saving shelters for people experiencing homelessness.

LAHSA is a joint powers authority of the City and County of Los Angeles and serves as the lead agency in the Los Angeles Continuum of Care (CoC). LAHSA is responsible for funding a significant portion of the interim housing, permanent housing, and supportive services for individuals and families experiencing homelessness in Los Angeles County.

California faces an ongoing homelessness crisis. According to the 2018 Point-in-Time Count, there were 130,000 people experiencing homelessness on any given night in the state, accounting for nearly one in every four people experiencing homelessness nationwide. Over two-thirds of those Californians, a total of nearly 90,000 people, were experiencing unsheltered homelessness. These thousands of Californians sleep on streets, in tents, and in underpasses, exposed to the elements. In Los Angeles County alone, there are approximately 39,000 people experiencing unsheltered homelessness.

The sustainable solution to end homelessness is permanent housing: supportive housing, building and preserving affordable housing, and rapid re-housing, among other long-term solutions. Until permanent housing can be scaled, California faces an immediate crisis threatening the health and safety of thousands. As a recent piece in the Los Angeles Times noted, “hypothermia has led to more deaths in LA than in colder regions.” Meanwhile, a report from the Los Angeles County Coroner found that deaths among homeless people spike in the summertime when the temperatures rise. In July 2018, over 90 people experiencing homelessness died in Los Angeles County, more than any other month that year.

In total, there were approximately 899 deaths of people experiencing homelessness on the streets of Los Angeles County in 2018—a 121% increase from 2012, when 407 people died. According to the coroner’s investigations, at least 66% of these deaths were unnatural, more than six times the rate of unnatural deaths in the general population of Los Angeles County. To put it simply, unsheltered homelessness is a life or death crisis—and one that is avoidable.

AB 761 would help bring respite to these neighbors by making it easier for local jurisdictions to use state-owned armories to shelter people. At present, a number of state-owned armories are authorized for use by local jurisdictions as homeless shelters from October to
April, but a number of onerous requirements and fees limit their use. This bill would cut through these burdensome requirements, making it less costly to use these armories for emergency shelter purposes, while also opening these armories for shelter purposes during the hottest months of the year, when the health risks from the elements are severe.

Combating homelessness must be an “all of the above” approach, with the state investing more in permanent solutions to homelessness, such as service-rich bridge housing that connects people to stable housing, as well as life-saving basic shelters that save lives. The Los Angeles community is hard at work making these long-term housing investments; Proposition HHH in the City of Los Angeles is providing $1.2 billion in bond funding to build thousands of supportive housing units, while Los Angeles County’s Measure H, a quarter-cent sales tax providing $355 million in revenue annually, is paying for rental subsidies, case management, and other services that are housing thousands of people each year.

We are also making rapid strides to increase the number of bridge housing sites that provide shelter while also connecting people to the intensive case management that leads people to more sustainable, permanent housing solutions. However, building supportive housing and siting new interim housing sites is a time-intensive, slow process. As the LA County coroner’s report demonstrates, the thousands of people living on our streets do not have a moment to spare.

State-owned armories provide an immediate potential resource to alleviate this crisis. These sites are zoned for use as emergency shelter, and most lie vacant on the majority of nights. But high costs and burdensome requirements have led many CoCs, including the LA CoC, to avoid using state-owned armories. These requirements include:

- A nightly fee paid to the California Military Department that is more than double the comparable market rate paid to similar-sized spaces;
- Requiring CoCs to use outside contractors for janitorial services;
- Requiring CoCs to be solely responsible for alternative housing arrangements when the Military Department announces drill days, even with minimal advance notice;
- Requiring CoCs to use an outside contractor for security services in addition to coordinating nightly visits from the local police department.

Taken together, these requirements can add $600-$800 in daily costs to use an armory. AB 761 would cut these costs considerably, and make state-owned armories a more feasible option for CoCs seeking emergency shelter arrangements. LAHSA estimates that if AB 761 were to pass, an additional 600 beds in LA County would become readily available as a result. For these reasons, we urge the committee to move AB 761 forward. We appreciate the legislature’s commitment to addressing homelessness and hope you will support AB 761.

Sincerely,

Kelli Bernard
Chair, LAHSA Commission

Peter Lynn
Executive Director