

**Statement of
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Before the
Committee on Veterans' Affairs
U.S. House of Representatives
Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity**

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Mr. Chairman and members of the Subcommittee, I appreciate the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss the activities of VA's Vet Center program and the role it plays in providing outreach and care to veterans returning from Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) and Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF). I will also briefly describe the role of the Vet Centers in the recent New Hampshire National Guard Reverse Soldier Readiness Program.

The Vet Center program observed its 25th year serving veterans this year. The program was originally established by Congress in 1979 to meet the readjustment needs of veterans returning from the Vietnam War. From the outset, Vet Centers were designed to be community-based, non-medical facilities, offering easy access to care for Vietnam veterans who were experiencing difficulty in resuming a normal life following their service in a combat zone and other stressful military situations. Vet Centers were intended to serve as entry points for disenfranchised veterans in need of VA health care, as well as to provide readjustment counseling, job counseling, benefits counseling, referrals to community services, and other services as needed in particular localities. Additionally and by design, most Vet Center staff are veterans themselves and serve as counselors and role models to veterans-in-need. Immediate family members of eligible veterans are also eligible for certain Vet Center mental health services.

Twenty-five years later, following the grass-roots popularity of the program, eligibility for Vet Center readjustment counseling services has expanded to include all combat veterans. The Vet Center program also provides bereavement counseling services to family members of those soldiers killed while on active duty in service to their country. In addition, the Vet Centers are used to provide counseling to veterans who experienced sexual trauma while on active duty.

The program has grown to 207 Vet Centers nationwide located in all 50 states, and in Puerto Rico, the Virgin Islands, the District of Columbia and Guam. There are 33 Vet Centers in the Readjustment Counseling Services' Northeast Region, which encompasses

the following eight states: Connecticut, Massachusetts, Maine, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, Rhode Island and Vermont.

Last year the Under Secretary for Health approved an additional 50 staff positions for the Vet Center Program to provide outreach and assistance specifically to returning OEF/OIF returnees. The northeast region received eight positions from this nationwide allotment and filled the positions with OEF/OIF veterans within 90 days. This fiscal year the region received another seven positions and we have filled – or are interviewing OEF/OIF veterans for – these newly created positions.

As part of the program's outreach campaign, Vet Center clinicians began providing educational and outreach information to the families of deployed Global War on Terrorism soldiers about potential readjustment issues and VA services soon after the first National Guard and Reserve units were deployed almost two years ago. Part of this outreach effort was to inform National Guard leaders of Vet Center services to facilitate early contact and a smooth transition for returning veterans.

Late last year, NH Guard leadership met with the Manchester, New Hampshire, Vet Center team leader to discuss a potential Vet Center role in their developing Reverse Soldier Readiness Program (RSRP) for soon-returning NH Guard men and women. In addition to VBA and VA participation, the NH National Guard was seeking an organization that understood the military culture and could provide hour – long individual counseling and assessment sessions for each returning soldier. Following extensive consultation with their active duty counterparts, the NH National Guard concluded that in order to destigmatize the soldier's asking for help, individual counseling would be a core component of this initiative for all their returnees. Successive planning meetings between NH National Guard leadership and Vet Center Northeast Regional Office senior staff reinforced the need for a collaborative effort to meet NH National Guard goals. The Vet Center's 25 year history of working with combat veterans to overcome the stigma associated with seeking professional assistance, plus the Vet Center program's understanding of military culture and experience, helped contribute to the inclusion of Vet Centers in the re-entry program being developed by the NH Guard.

During the implementation period of January 20 through March 7, 2005, 31 Vet Center clinicians from 16 surrounding Vet Centers assembled at the Manchester VA Medical Center to provide individual, hour-long assessment sessions to over 810 NH veterans returning from duty in Iraq. Using an intake protocol specifically designed for this purpose, Vet Center counselors - many of who were themselves combat veterans – assessed all returning veterans for depression, acute war zone stress reaction, suicidal/homicidal ideation and other possible readjustment issues, such as emerging family issues.

Since completion of the primary phase of this project, the Manchester Vet Center has seen an additional 14 Afghanistan NHNG veterans and continues to work with NH Guard leadership by seeing small groups of returning OEF/OIF veterans at the Vet Center every Thursday to continue the individual assessment process.

As of this writing, a total of 838 NH Guard veterans have been seen by Vet Center staff in individual, confidential counseling sessions. A service plan was developed for each OEF/OIF veteran seen and reviewed with them during their counseling session. Of the total number of veterans seen, approximately 402 requested follow-up care by the Vet Centers (48%). There are an estimated 144 NH National Guard veterans currently in on-going Vet Center care at several area Vet Centers. (17%).

It was both an honor and a privilege for the Vet Center program to participate in the overall NH National Guard RSRP. As the community-based outreach component within VHA, our experience was that offering these services to returning National Guard soldiers was well within the Vet Center mission. We have appreciated the opportunity to serve our returning veterans in a proactive, individualized manner because these men and women deserve the very best care we can provide them.

Thank you.