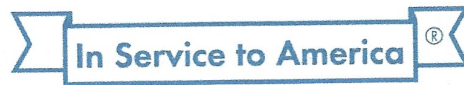


Statement of



Submitted by

Dr. Tom Hall, PhD,
Chair VVA PTSD Committee

Before the

House Committee on Veterans' Affairs
Subcommittee on Health

Regarding

Close to Home: Supporting Vet Centers in Meeting the
Needs of Veterans and Military Personnel

February 3, 2022

There remains some ambiguity around the requirements of the Council for the Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) and the ability of those programs and counselors without this credential not being utilized to their full capacity, as they were prior to the enforcement of the CACREP requirement. Given that many employees were certified long before CACREP existed for their graduate school training, and many schools still do not offer CACREP certification, our pressing concern is this enforcement limits the number of veterans able to receive services at Vet Centers. Additionally, for these counselors, most of whom are veterans who have been providing services for years, how is it that none were grandfathered in or advised of this requirement when accessing their educational benefits?

While not solely a program at Vet Centers, I am glad to hear about the Rural Suicide prevention currently being piloted by the VA. I hope to see this pilot made available to all rural veterans through their Vet Centers as well as the VA.

There is inconsistency in the governance of which Vet Center facilities are open and which are suspended. After two years, COVID can no longer be an excuse. For example, veterans in Alaska report activities at Vet Centers, while not officially closed, have been suspended, leaving veterans who relied on these services out in the cold, both literally and figuratively. Whereas in Kansas City, Missouri, the Vet Center's doors are wide open. VVA strongly recommends VA conduct a nationwide assessment of which facilities are open and which are suspended, clarify national policies, and better communicate these policies with their Vet Centers.

Regarding the need for expansion, veterans have reported Vet Center counselors may not commute over 50 miles to provide needed services at Vet Centers. VVA supports continued expansion efforts of Vet Centers.

VVA has provided recommendations to improve the *Vet Center Improvement Act of 2021*, in H.R. 3575, introduced by Representative Cicilline, (D-RI-1). The bill directs GAO to conduct an audit of readjustment counselors' feedback of Vet Centers for only a five-year period. This time-delimited period is problematic as, after this five-year period, there would no longer be the oversight of GAO or any other objective oversight entity ensuring quality of care and counselor well-being are not compromised due to excessive or improper productivity standards. We believe ongoing, third-party supervision, outside of the VA, would ensure these problems would not reoccur.

Secondly, we voiced our suggestions regarding the development and approval of the survey instrument used to gather the anonymous counselor feedback. We believe the collection of the data through the survey **must be done** in such a manner to ensure relevant and accurate information is collected, archived, and stored, and that this information pertains to the impact of productivity expectations on client care and counselor welfare. The GAO report discovered this to be a major concern in its investigation, as reported in *VA Vet Centers: Evaluations Needed of Expectations for Counselor Productivity and Centers' Staffing*, (<https://www.gao.gov/products/GAO-20-652>), finding that the All-employee Survey used

VIETNAM VETERANS OF AMERICA

Funding Statement

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The national organization Vietnam Veterans of America (VVA) is a non-profit veterans' membership organization registered as a 501(c) (19) with the Internal Revenue Service. VVA is also appropriately registered with the Secretary of the Senate and the Clerk of the House of Representatives in compliance with the Lobbying Disclosure Act of 1995.

VVA is not currently in receipt of any federal grant or contract, other than the routine allocation of office space and associated resources in VA Regional Offices for outreach and direct services through its Veterans Benefits Program (Service Representatives). This is also true of the previous two fiscal years.

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