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BEFORE THE  
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS  
UNITED STATES SENATE**

**January 31, 2024**

Good afternoon, Chairman Tester, Ranking Member Moran, and Members of the Committee. I appreciate the opportunity to discuss the readjustment counseling services available at Vet Centers.

Readjustment Counseling Service (RCS) Vet Centers are community-based locations that offer readjustment counseling in a safe and confidential environment to eligible Veterans, certain Active Duty Service members (ADSM), and their families. Statute 38 U.S.C. §1712A tasks Vet Centers with three major functions: direct counseling services, outreach, and referral. A core value of RCS is to promote access to support by helping eligible Veterans, ADSMs, and families overcome barriers that may impede them from using Vet Center services.

**Purpose, Mission, and Culture**

RCS Vet Centers aid eligible Veterans and members of the Armed Forces, including members of the Reserve components, in adjusting successfully to life after deployment or activation. They also assist eligible individuals who experienced certain military service-related trauma and those actively using qualifying educational benefits. The RCS mission is to welcome home and honor those who served, those still serving, and their families by reaching out to them, engaging their communities, and providing a broad range of counseling, outreach, and referral services. Family members are also eligible for readjustment counseling services when it is found to benefit the readjustment of those who have served or in other situations, such as the death of an ADSM or Veteran by suicide. Additionally, Vet Centers are, by law, separate from VA's general health care facilities.

Vet Center services are designed to provide non-medical readjustment services to eligible individuals. The non-medical Vet Center approach within a Veteran/ADSM population with shared/similar experiences allows for access to a supportive community that is non-stigmatizing, builds trust, and creates an environment conducive to addressing trauma exposure and concerns.

The readjustment counseling model uses community-based, interdisciplinary clinical and team-based therapies to provide trauma-informed services that are delivered with military cultural competence. This model uses a variety of different events and engagements with the stakeholder community. Many of these services are

delivered by staff who are combat Veterans, fostering an empathetic connection to the client.

## **Vet Center Customer Experience**

Direct Feedback through from individuals served by Vet Centers shows that these services have a significant and positive impact on the overall wellbeing of individuals served across RCS. The provision of culturally competent services and focus on individual needs has also resulted in strong customer satisfaction and experience scores. Customer experience is the product of interactions between an organization and a customer over the duration of their relationship. VA measures these interactions through Ease, Effectiveness, and Emotion, all of which impact the overall trust the customer has in the organization. RCS surveys of Veterans and other beneficiaries are designed to measure this performance by asking users their level of agreement with statements about their experience with Vet Centers. Data provided below are for the time period of July 1, 2021, to December 31, 2023, and are based on over 72,500 respondents' scores. These data are limited to the Vet Center participants who responded to this survey, and the responses were not weighted to reflect the larger sample. Vet Center customer experience survey agreement is measured on a 5-point Likert scale. The data reported is the percentage of individuals responding to the following questions with a 4-Agree or 5-Strongly agree to the following areas of focus:

- **Ease/Simplicity (91.4% of users agreed):** The Vet Center offers remote and in-person services to clients that are assessable and appointment times that are convenient to the client.
- **Efficiency/Speed (95.3% of users agreed):** The Vet Center schedules appointments within a reasonable amount of time.
- **Quality (95.9% of users agreed):** The Vet Center staff makes clients feel welcome and safe. Individualized services are provided to the client.
- **Employee Helpfulness (90.7% of users agreed):** The Vet Center provided or connected the client to services, resources, or help that was needed to meet goals.
- **Equity and Transparency (93.3% of users agreed):** I was aware of the intake process to become a Vet Center client. My counselor explained my role in my counseling in a way I could understand.
- **Satisfaction (92.2% of users expressed agreement):** The services received at Vet Centers have met or exceeded the expectations of the client.
- **Confidence/Trust (93.2% of users expressed agreement):** The client trusts the Vet Centers to provide services for improving their quality of life.

VA uses VSignals surveys to collect, analyze and track customer experience feedback from service members, Veterans and other stakeholders, and use it to identify opportunities to enhance customer experience. For all VSignals surveys across the Department, VA uses the “trust score” as a standard measure to assess the overall trust the customer has in the organization. The “trust score” for Vet Center services is a direct measure of the Confidence/Trust question above and is an indicator of the satisfaction ratings by Vet Center clients.

## **Services and Locations**

RCS offers a broad range of services to assist eligible Veterans, ADSMs, and their families in readjusting to life during and after military service. These services include readjustment, family, bereavement, and military sexual trauma (MST) counseling. Other services include counseling and referrals for mental health and substance abuse, outreach, and referrals for benefits assistance. To support service demands that are specific to respective communities, readjustment counseling may be provided through a Vet Center, Vet Center Outstation, Vet Center Community Access Point (CAP) or Mobile Vet Center (MVC); each are described in more detail below. These assets are available in every state, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, Guam, American Samoa, the United States Virgin Islands, and the Commonwealth of the Northern Marianas Islands. Established in rural and urban communities, RCS has grown from a few established service locations in major cities to a service comprised of 303 Vet Centers, 21 Vet Center Outstations, over 440 Vet Center CAPs (the specific number fluctuates based upon demand), and 84 MVCs. The number of Vet Centers and Vet Center Outstations includes new sites approved in fiscal year (FY) 2023 that may not yet have workload associated with those specific locations. As of January 29, 2024, RCS consists of an authorized 2321 positions across the organization.

### Vet Centers

Vet Centers offer a comprehensive range of readjustment counseling services, including for military service-related trauma, MST, and family counseling. They provide individual, group, and marriage and family counseling, as well as referrals to other VA or community benefits and services. The team of service providers consists of a variable mix of licensed mental health professionals, other master’s level professionally trained counselors, and non-licensed outreach workers and program support assistants. Vet Center staff do not diagnose clients; rather, staff work to identify client-reported symptoms of conditions and take a holistic and strength-based approach to improve them. Many of these services are delivered by staff who are combat Veterans, fostering an empathetic connection to the client. Vet Centers are in leased space in the community outside of the larger VA medical facilities and average six staff, which includes supervisory, counseling, outreach, and administrative personnel. The placement of Vet Centers within the community is intentional, designed to maximize access for local Veterans, ADSMs, and their families via all modes of transportation, such as public, private vehicle, and pedestrian traffic. The RCS program seeks to mitigate barriers to accessing Vet Center services through the national implementation

of non-traditional service hours (i.e., early mornings, evenings, weekends, and holidays).

### Vet Center Outstations

Vet Center Outstations are locations where at least one Vet Center counselor is permanently assigned to provide full-time services in a community distant from one of the 303 Vet Centers. Vet Center Outstations are established in leased space as an adjunct to an existing Vet Center. Vet Center Outstations are generally located within a community with a demand for services that does not support the need for a full Vet Center. These locations are generally staffed with a minimum of one to two Vet Center counselors and are designed to increase access to services by taking the Vet Center services to the communities where Veterans, ADSMs, and their families live.

### Vet Center Community Access Points (CAP)

Vet Center staff regularly deliver readjustment counseling services outside of the existing 303 "brick and mortar" Vet Centers and 22 Vet Center Outstations. Vet Center CAPs are typically located in donated space established in conjunction with a community organization for the purpose of providing readjustment counseling services to a small number of Veterans, ADSMs, and their families. These may be staffed from one day per month up to several times per week depending on demand. Typically, the workload does not support a full-time Vet Center employee five days per week. The use of Vet Center CAPs allows RCS significant flexibility to stand up new sites or reallocate existing sites to areas of high demand without requiring the lengthy contracting processes involved with establishment of Vet Centers and Vet Center Outstations. Use of Vet Center CAPs allows RCS to rapidly respond to the changing needs of the communities they serve.

### Mobile Vet Centers (MVC)

MVCs are used to take services to communities that are distant from a Vet Center or Vet Center Outstation and do not meet the requirements for one of these venues. In many instances, these communities are distant from existing services and are considered rural or highly rural communities. Staffing for these vehicles may include readjustment counselors or outreach specialists. MVCs can provide direct readjustment counseling, access to services offered at Vet Centers, assistance with benefits, and rapid response to crisis situations. Each MVC includes a confidential counseling space for direct service provision, as well as a state-of-the-art satellite communications package that includes fully encrypted teleconferencing equipment, that provides access to all relevant VA information technology systems, and connectivity to emergency response systems. MVCs attempt to take advantage of community events where large gatherings of eligible individuals may be found.

## **Allocation and Expansion of Vet Center Assets**

Determining how to meet the needs of a community starts with identifying the number of eligible Veterans, ADSMs, and family members in that respective community and the type of readjustment counseling services they may require. This process also considers the closest established Vet Center and the potential overlap of services. Other factors include an assessment of need for daily, weekly, or monthly services in the community, the availability of space that can be used to provide the needed services, and the ability to meet community needs with an MVC.

RCS seeks to provide services where clients are located and in FY 2021, collaborated with an actuarial contractor to project future readjustment counseling use through an experience-based use projection model and an anticipated demand-based projection model. The experience-based model relies on historical use patterns to project future use, while the demand model uses program eligibility projections and average use rates to forecast demand. The difference between the two models highlights areas where eligible individuals may benefit from additional RCS assets and services and provides a data-informed process for RCS to identify areas for service analysis. RCS looks at projected demand in estimated RCS service hours by zip code through an ArcGIS Geospatial interface (a mapping and analytics application) based on demand projections for FY 2024-2028. These service projections are refined annually, and RCS will incorporate changes in policy, eligibility, operations, or other significant events affecting the program in future versions of the model.

The demand projection model is one key element to determining future placement of Vet Center assets. The projected service data must be validated for each geographic location through the following: evaluation of capacity of existing RCS assets in the region; geographic specific barriers and other considerations; outreach to potential clients; evaluation of other local services; and other variables specific to identified areas for analysis. RCS relies on this process to assess how use is projected to develop over time and how Vet Center resources could be allocated or reallocated geographically to best meet demand for the entire eligible population served.

In response to this demand analysis over the past year, RCS has increased the overall number of Vet Centers and Vet Center Outstations to better meet the needs of those we serve. In FY 2023, RCS gained approval to create three new Vet Centers including the Clarksville, Tennessee and U.S. Virgin Islands Vet Centers, which were both upgraded from Vet Center Outstations, and the Fredericksburg, Virginia Vet Center, which is a new service location that was identified as the highest area of unmet demand that is more than 30 miles from an existing RCS service asset. Additionally, RCS received approval in early FY 2024 to upgrade the CAP in Vineland, New Jersey to a permanent Vet Center Outstation with full-time staffing.

Additionally, RCS will continue to use Vet Center CAPs, which highlight RCS' ability to be flexible in determining service locations while allowing Vet Center staff to provide regularly scheduled services in areas with higher demand for services that do

not require full-time resources. If service demand increases, decreases, or shifts, this model allows RCS to easily shift service locations accordingly. As service demand grows in a Vet Center CAP, RCS can convert these locations to Vet Center Outstations where staff will be permanently assigned. If demand continues to grow beyond capabilities for a Vet Center Outstation, RCS can establish a full Vet Center. Every effort is made to tailor Vet Center services to the needs of the community. RCS works collaboratively with communities to meet these needs in a manner that works best for eligible clients.

RCS plans to further use the demand projection model to explore areas for further expansion throughout FY 2024 and beyond. RCS expects continued growth and expansion of services as more individuals become aware of their eligibility and request readjustment counseling services. To meet this projected increase in demand, RCS will continue to assess the need for additional staff to increase Vet Center services and support the multi-year planned expansion and relocation of Vet Center assets nationwide in high-demand and rural areas.

### **Collaboration with VA Medical Centers**

While Vet Center organizational structure and authorities are separate from VA medical centers', there is collaborative connection through bi-directional referral, care coordination, and quality review that is consistent with Vet Center confidentiality. Every Vet Center is required to have both a local VA medical center clinical liaison and an administrative liaison.

- The clinical liaison assists Vet Centers with the following: making referrals and coordinating services for eligible individuals whose care is shared with the support VA medical facility; coordinating suicide prevention activities in conjunction with the VA medical facility Suicide Prevention Coordinator; assisting Vet Centers in conducting Mortality and Morbidity reviews for Vet Center clients; and providing supportive clinical assistance with eligible Veterans whose service needs go beyond the scope of readjustment counseling.
- The administrative liaison assists Vet Centers in connecting to administrative support such as acquisition, engineering service, and fleet management.

RCS national and field leaders are members of the national and Veterans Integrated Service Network Mental Health Integrated Clinical Community (ICC).. ICCs are Veteran-focused forums that are intended to create streamlined communication flows that amplify the voices of frontline employees and allow for efficient decision making. The goal of the ICC is to help identify variations, spread leading practices, and drive continuous improvement across VA to provide the highest quality of Veteran care.

In addition, the Office of Mental Health and Suicide Prevention has included a review of the role of the clinical and administrative liaisons in recent site visits that focus on evaluating mental health operations and service delivery at VA facilities. There is a

specific review that looks at whether required positions are filled per policy as well as opportunities for improvements in VA medical center and Vet Center partnerships.

### **Vet Center Eligibility Expansion**

Section 402 of the *Support The Resiliency of Our Nation's Great (STRONG) Veterans Act of 2022* (Div. V of P.L 117-328) amended 38 U.S.C. § 1712A to make eligible for Vet Center services Veterans and members of the Armed Forces pursuing a course of education using certain educational assistance benefits. Section 403 of the same Act made family members of Veterans or members of the Armed Forces who died by suicide eligible for Vet Center services, to the degree that counseling furnished to such individual is found to aid in coping with the effects of suicide. VA completed interim policy to roll-out these new authorities on June 5, 2023, allowing RCS to begin services to these newly eligible groups while concurrently working to update VA's regulations. As of January 23, 2024, Vet Centers have provided readjustment counseling to approximately 250 student beneficiaries. Of those, approximately 170 were eligible solely because of their status as a student beneficiary using a qualifying educational benefit. Additionally, for the same time period, approximately 180 family members of a Veteran or member of the Armed Forces who died by suicide have received Vet Center services under the new authority granted by section 403 of the STRONG Veterans Act of 2022.

### **Vet Center Work Force Expansion**

Section 102 of the STRONG Veterans Act of 2022 required VA to hire an additional 50 full-time equivalent employees for Vet Centers to bolster the workforce and expand mental health resources to Veterans, members of the Armed Forces, and families by December 29, 2023. RCS determined the locations for these additional 50 employees through extensive analysis of direct service, projection demand model data, caseloads, and unique geographical factors. RCS is holding ongoing weekly meetings to monitor statutory compliance and progress. As of December 31, 2023, RCS made selections for all 50 employees under this section.

### **Vet Center Scholarships**

Section 502 of the *Commander John Scott Hannon Veterans Mental Health Care Improvement Act of 2019* (P.L. 116-171) required VA, as part of the Educational Assistance Program, to carry out the VA RCS Scholarship Program to provide scholarships to individuals seeking mental health-related advanced degrees in psychology, professional counseling (i.e., Licensed Professional Mental Health Counselor), marriage and family therapy (i.e., Marriage and Family Therapist), and social work (i.e., Master of Social Work). The individual is required to work at a Vet Center for six years after graduation. The award covers two years of all approved tuitions and fees, an annual book voucher of \$1,200, and a monthly stipend of \$1,200 while enrolled. Applications are being accepted and reviewed on a rolling basis with preference given to Veterans and ADSMs. VA has promoted the scholarship through

National press releases and media coverage, briefings to state directors of Veterans Affairs and Veterans Service Organizations, including Student Veterans of America. VA also targeted outreach to university department chairs and deans of students in communities that have experienced challenges in recruitment to include the Hopi and Navajo communities and the Northern Arizona University's Office of Indigenous Student Success. As of January 23, 2023, RCS awarded 46 scholarships, with 24 of the scholarships going to Veterans. In FY 2024, 12 mental health professionals are expected to graduate and transition to employment at a Vet Center. The first individual to graduate under this program completed their course of study and was placed at a Vet Center in December 2023. RCS anticipates six students to graduate in the spring 2024 semester and an additional five to graduate in the summer 2024 semester.

## **Pilot Programs**

### Travel cost reimbursement for accessing readjustment counseling services

Section 244 of the *Joseph Maxwell Cleland and Robert Joseph Dole Memorial Veterans Benefits and Health Care Improvement Act of 2022* (Cleland-Dole Act; Div. U. of P.L 117-328) requires VA to establish a 5-year pilot program within RCS to assess the feasibility and advisability of providing payment to cover or offset financial difficulties of an individual in accessing or using transportation to and from the nearest Vet Center service site providing the necessary readjustment counseling services for the individual's plan of service. VA must limit participation to individuals who are eligible for Vet Center services at participating locations and experiencing financial hardship. Participating Vet Centers include the four locations (Bangor, Maine; Kalispell, Montana; Santa Fe, New Mexico; and Spokane, Washington) providing payments and allowances for beneficiary travel under section 104 of the Honoring America's Veterans and Caring for Camp Lejeune Families Act of 2012 (P.L 112-154) and an additional 46 locations (total of 50 locations) serving individuals in rural, highly rural, or tribal areas (across all five RCS Districts).

VA has conducted a thorough review of the statutory requirements and developed implementation plans as a result. Based on this review, VA has determined that rulemaking is required to implement the pilot program required by section 244 of the Cleland-Dole Act. VA will need to define, through rulemaking, several elements, including—as required by section 244(b)(2)(B)—defining what constitutes financial hardship. VA will also likely need to address what is included under the phrase “payment to cover or offset financial difficulties of an individual in accessing or using transportation,” among other provisions.

VA is committed to creating a robust pilot program. VA anticipates proposing regulations that would allow for implementation at approximately 50 Vet Centers. Location determinations would focus on equal distribution among qualifying locations across the country and increasing pilot use. VA is working expeditiously to publish and finalize regulations as soon as feasible.



## Grant Program to Combat Food Insecurity Among Veterans and Family Members of Veterans

VA is fully committed to the successful implementation of the pilot program required by section 5126(f) of the *James M. Inhofe National Defense Authorization Act for FY 2023* (P.L. 117-263). VA is developing regulations to support a 3-year pilot program to award grants to eligible entities to support partnerships that address food insecurity among Veterans and family members of Veterans who receive services through Vet Centers or other VA facilities. This critical initiative represents a significant step forward in our commitment to ensuring the well-being of those who have served. The pilot program will not be limited in scope to Vet Centers so that VA can comprehensively address the issue of food insecurity among eligible Veterans and family members.

### Native VetSuccess at Tribal Colleges and Universities

Section 211 of the Cleland-Dole Act requires VA to carry out a 5-year pilot program to assess the feasibility and advisability of expanding the VetSuccess on Campus program to additional tribal colleges and universities. The Veterans Benefits Administration's (VBA) Veteran Readiness and Employment Service (VR&E), in partnership with RCS, will provide culturally competent outreach and services to eligible students at tribal colleges and universities to close gaps in health care, education, and employment for Native American Veterans and their eligible dependents. VBA has identified three regional service areas and is currently evaluating colleges/universities in these areas to best serve eligible Tribal students. Evaluation includes degrees/trainings/certifications offered as well as proximity to VA facilities, including Vet Centers.

### **Enhancing Vet Center Services and Outreach**

VA is grateful for independent reviews to improve vital Vet Center services and outreach through VA's Office of Inspector General (OIG) and the Government Accountability Office (GAO). The recently started annual OIG Vet Center Inspection Program focuses on suicide prevention, leadership and organization risks, consultation, supervision, training, environment of care, and outreach. GAO has also recently completed reviews related to RCS outreach activities, assessing barriers to care and awareness of services and potential staffing challenges in providing services. Additionally, GAO is actively conducting reviews in which RCS is included with focus areas concerning student Veterans' mental health, and the physical infrastructure of Vet Centers. At this time GAO Report 22-105039 "Opportunities Exist to Help Better Ensure Veterans' and Servicemembers' Readjustment Counseling Needs Are Met" is the only GAO report in which RCS has open recommendations. RCS received five recommendations in this report. One recommendation is complete and has been closed by GAO. RCS is on track for completion of action plans to address the remaining four open recommendations and collaborates with GAO for regular status updates on this progress. RCS stands ready to address any potential recommendations resulting from ongoing reviews.

## **Conclusion**

VA is committed to providing quality readjustment counseling services and assisting Veterans, ADSMs, and their families toward a successful adjustment. We appreciate Congress' continued support and encouragement in this vital resource for Veterans. Chairman Tester, this concludes my testimony and I am prepared to answer any questions you may have.