

Mr. Joseph Costello, MA Team Leader, Vet Center, Vista, CA

Statement of
Joseph J. Costello, M.A.
Team Leader
Vista Vet Center
Department of Veterans Affairs
Before the
Committee on Veterans' Affairs
United States Senate

March 17, 2005

Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee: I am privileged to appear before you today to discuss the role of the Vista Vet Center in providing care and services to veterans returning from Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) and Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF). Although this statement will focus on the activities of the Vista Vet Center, our efforts are typical of the 206 Vet Centers nationwide.

Under the leadership of Dr. Alfonso Batres, Chief of the Readjustment Counseling Service, and Mr. Richard Talbott, the Pacific Western Regional Manager, the Vista Vet Center, located in Vista, California, endeavors to provide the highest quality readjustment counseling and outreach services in an expeditious and cost-effective manner to eligible veterans and their families, especially those who are suffering from readjustment problems related to combat trauma or military sexual trauma experienced while on active duty.

The services we provide for veterans include community outreach; referral to Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) medical and benefits providers; individual, group and family readjustment counseling; military sexual trauma counseling; and on-site employment assistance and vocational rehabilitation counseling via out-stationed ancillary staff. Vista Vet Center staff provides ongoing outreach to newly returning veterans of combat operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. Additionally, for more than a year, Vista Vet Center counselors have provided bereavement counseling to family members of military personnel killed on active duty in Iraq or Afghanistan. The Vista Vet Center is located approximately 10 miles from the Camp Pendleton Marine Corps Base. We serve the communities of North San Diego County and Southern Riverside County. The community-based location of the Vista Vet Center provides maximum accessibility for our veteran clients. The Vista Vet Center is co-located with a VA Community Based Outpatient Clinic (CBOC). Many of our veteran clients also receive VA medical care at this facility. We are fortunate to have a close and cooperative relationship with our colleagues in the San Diego VA Healthcare System, a relationship that we nurtured by providing office space for medical staff before the CBOC was actually established.

The Vista Vet Center maintains non-traditional hours in an effort to ensure that veterans, whether employed or not, have access to services at a time that is convenient for them. The center is staffed from 7:00 am until 8:30 pm Monday through Thursday, and from 7:00 am until 4:30 pm on Friday. We also provide outreach assistance to newly returning veterans and family members and participate in community activities on weekends. If a military or veterans service organization requests our presence at a function during non-traditional hours, it can be assured of

our enthusiastic participation.

The Vista Vet Center has a core staff of four persons: a Team Leader, two Counselors, and an Office Manager. The staff has also been augmented by the addition of one half-time Military Sexual Trauma Counselor and one full-time Global War on Terrorism (GWOT) Outreach Worker. All of the team members are veterans, and four hold various mental health licensure and/or certifications, to include social work, psychology, marriage and family therapy, and alcohol and drug abuse counseling.

Ancillary staff members on site weekly at the Vista Vet Center include a full-time licensed psychiatric nurse clinical specialist volunteer, a County of San Diego Veterans Services Representative who provides benefits assistance to our veterans, a VA Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor, a VA Homeless Outreach Counselor, and Employment Assistance Counselors from the State of California. The Vista Vet Center also participates in the VA Work Study program. This program allows recently discharged veterans an opportunity to earn money doing supportive work for veterans and the Vista Vet Center staff while attending school. Two of our current work-study staff members are also Operation Iraqi Freedom veterans. All of the members of the ancillary staff are instrumental to the success of the Vet Center mission.

The Vista Vet Center continues to provide readjustment counseling and supportive social services to a large percentage of Vietnam veterans. At the same time, we provide readjustment counseling services to all combat veterans who request our services (who include an increasing number of OEF/OIF veterans) and to victims of military sexual trauma. Over the past year, we have also provided bereavement counseling for three family members of two Marines and one soldier killed in action in Iraq. During FY 2004, the Vista Vet Center served 635 individual veterans and had 6,849 visits from veterans and family members. Nearly 50 percent (312) of the individual veterans served in FY 2004 were either OIF or OEF veterans.

The Vista Vet Center provides intense and comprehensive counseling opportunities for North San Diego County veterans and their families. Our goal is to assist combat veterans and veterans who have suffered military sexual trauma to achieve a productive transition from military to civilian life. Counseling services available through the Vet Center include individual, couples, family, and group sessions. Specific, focused group counseling activities include anger management, stress management, trauma-focused group therapy, posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) process groups, spouse and significant other groups, and family education groups. The Vista Vet Center staff also coordinates with Veterans Benefits Administration locally to participate in weekly Transitional Assistance Program (TAP) briefings at Camp Pendleton and Naval Station San Diego.

In August 2004, the Vista Vet Center became the first Vet Center in the Pacific Western region to hire a GWOT outreach counselor. This counselor immediately implemented an aggressive outreach effort. To date, the Vista Vet Center has conducted outreach and provided information on Vet Center services to every National Guard Armory and Reserve Center in San Diego County.

The Vista Vet Center also conducts outreach activities to nearly every veteran's service organization and college campus in the county. These organizations, as well as the military and veteran community, have enthusiastically embraced our efforts. We have also developed an effective working relationship with the Family Readiness Program of the California National Guard and with various Army Reserve units. Vet Center staff members participate in family presentations and recreational activities with family members of deployed National Guard troops. Our outreach efforts also extend to active duty military activities in San Diego County.

Of particular note is a recent collaboration undertaken with Naval Medical Center (NMC) San Diego. NMC personnel have agreed to provide Vet Center staff with office space one day a week to assist OEF/OIF veterans in achieving seamless transition from military to VA care. The Vista Vet Center also has an excellent collaborative relationship with Naval Hospital Camp Pendleton and the Family Service Center at Camp Pendleton. We are discussing similar "office-space" arrangements with these military providers to enhance further our collaborative support for newly returning veterans.

The intent of the Vista Vet Center's aggressive outreach effort is to ensure that all veterans in San Diego County are aware of the services they are entitled to receive at the Vet Center. We will continue to strive to serve our veterans on their terms. A cup of coffee is always available and veterans are always welcome to stop by with or without an appointment. I can state without reservation that the Vista Vet Center staff is uniformly dedicated to helping all veterans who seek assistance through our center.

Mr. Chairman, this concludes my statement. I look forward to answering any questions that you or other members of the Committee might have.