

Dr. Jeanne Douglas, Team Leader, VetCenter, Oak Park, Illinois

DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS

Readjustment Counseling Service

155 S. Oak Park Avenue

Oak Park, IL 60302

From: Jeanne A. Douglas, PhD, Team Leader, Oak Park, IL Vet Center

To: Senate Committee on Veterans Affairs

Subject: Testimony pertaining to Oak Park, Illinois Vet Center Operations Panel,

My name is Dr. Jeanne Douglas, PhD, team leader of the Oak Park, Illinois Vet Center. Thank you for taking my testimony, I am honored to be here and provide testimony pertaining to the operations of the Oak Park, Illinois Vet Center.

The Department of Veterans Affairs, Readjustment Counseling Service (Vet Centers) was established in 1979 under Public Law 96-22 to address the readjustment needs of Vietnam veterans. Additional legislation extended program eligibility to veterans of other combat theaters, and to veterans who experience sexual trauma as a result of their military service. Vet Centers are traditionally located in communities to provide access to veterans in a setting that is as stress :

as possible. There are currently 207 Vet Centers in the United States and Puerto Rico.

The Oak Park, Illinois Vet Center was opened in January of 1980 and offers services to veterans who live on the Westside of Chicago and Cook county extending through the far western communities in Kane, DeKalb and DuPage Counties. Our staff consists of five mental health professionals including veterans :from Vietnam and Operation Desert Storm. Currently located at 155 South Oak Park Avenue, Oak Park, Illinois 60302, our Vet Center provides direct clinical services to combat veterans and veterans who have experienced sexual trauma and harassment during their time in the military. These clinical services may include individual, group, marital or family therapy. In addition, we provide outreach to homeless veterans, employment assistance to underemployed and unemployed veterans, referrals to veterans seeking disability, education for community mental health professionals, pre-release planning for incarcerated veterans, bereavement counseling for family members, and we are present at programs for returning OIF veterans and their families. Our catchment area covers an array of ethnic and racial compositions,

and includes a wide variety of social economic conditions. It is our intent to understand the needs of veterans :from different backgrounds so our services reflect our efforts to engage our clients with openness and sensitivity. Therefore, we have worked hard to become a part of a network of agencies that reach veterans in our community, creating a continuum of care that provides medical, dental, optical services; employment, legal, and housing assistance; benefits and educational information and a full range of psychological and trauma counseling. We have collaborative relationships with the Veterans Health Administration (VHA), the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA), County Health Departments, County Veterans Assistance offices, and veteran's service organizations to help us as we work to ensure a quality lifestyle for all returning veterans.

In addition, there are four other Vet Centers in the Chicago Metropolitan area (Beverly, Evanston and Chicago Heights in Illinois; Merrillville, Indiana). The staff at all five Vet Centers work well together planning city wide events such as the upcoming Supermarket of Veterans Services,

Standdowns, and various educational opportunities for our staff. We are able to share tasks when we need representation at National Guard and Reserve events or to providing a presence at job fairs, health fairs, or school programs. This Vet Center team effort makes it possible for us to direct veterans to the most convenient and appropriate facility to meet their needs.

Since the Oak Park Vet Center opened, we have served over 12,000 veterans and their families. In fiscal year 2004, we provided over 4453 visits, and in fiscal year 2005, we have provided over 3612 veteran visits. We are actively serving service members who are returning from the Global War on Terrorism and their families by providing briefings and materials upon their unit request. Returning soldiers are briefed on programs provided by the Vet Center, and about the potential impact of deployment on individuals and families. We provide monthly briefings to the 88th RRC (Forest Park, IL), to General Jones Armory, to Northwest Armory, and to North Riverside Armory. We also facilitate monthly support groups to family members of deployed service members. Our collaboration with family support representatives ensures that the Oak Park Vet Center is involved in addressing the readjustment needs of returning service members.

Again, thank you for taking my testimony pertaining to the service delivery of the Oak Park, Illinois Vet Center.

Jeanne A. Douglas, PhD

Team Leader

"Keeping the Promise"