

Mr. David Hosking Counselor, Vet Center, Madison, WI

Statement of  
David J. Hosking  
Global War on Terrorism Outreach Readjustment Counselor  
Madison Wisconsin 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: It is an honor to come before you today to speak about my role as a Global War on Terrorism (GWOT) Outreach Readjustment Counselor. With the guidance of the Vet Center program's leadership, we have created a much needed link between the returning veteran and the support systems that will help them readjust to their life at home with their loved ones. My assigned duties perfectly exemplify the Vet Center program's statement of purpose:

"We are the people in VA who welcome home war veterans with honor by providing quality readjustment counseling in a caring manner. Vet Centers understand and appreciate veterans' war experiences while assisting them and their family members toward a successful post-war adjustment in or near their community."

Now I would like to provide you with some specific examples of what I do as a GWOT Outreach Counselor. Most weeks I start with a trip to Fort McCoy Wisconsin, where I'm part of the demobilization process for troops returning from overseas. Some weeks I may go to Ft McCoy two or three times. I always start my presentation and briefing with "Good morning, veterans?" or "Good afternoon, veterans?" My heart fills with pride to see the look on their faces as they smile and look at each other. I then ask them if I'm the first person to refer to them as veterans. They answer "Yes!" and I tell them what an honor it is for me to have that privilege. I go on to tell them that I have sat in the chairs they are sitting in, that I am a Vietnam veteran and an Iraqi Freedom veteran and it is my privilege to provide them with a PowerPoint presentation and Vet Center briefing to make them aware of what is available for them in benefits and counseling if they should want or need services. Yes, I also like to tell them my standard joke, which I must say gets a laugh, and I've always said "laughter is the fuel for morale." In the last eight weeks, I have provided outreach to over 3,500 veterans returning home from the wars through Fort McCoy, Wisconsin. The veteran population processing through Fort McCoy includes veterans returning home to the states of Wisconsin, Minnesota, Tennessee, Alabama, Kentucky, Pennsylvania, Iowa, Michigan, Ohio and more. My outreach responsibilities are my first priority. When the troops are coming home through Fort McCoy, I reschedule all my other commitments. Do I get tired of doing the same thing over and over? Never! There are always new faces from different places. They have new things to tell me and make me glad that I was there on that day to meet them. The military behavioral health staff person at Fort McCoy told me after my first presentation "Wow, Dave, you sure bond easily with these troops." I told her "

I'm a veteran; it's veteran to veteran like trucker to trucker or biker to biker. We're on the same level from the word go. We know how each other feel and what we've been through. We don't need to explain it, we just know.?

At Fort McCoy, the soldiers do evaluations of our briefings and I get to see how they feel about them. Based upon these outcomes, I am happy to report that our outreach efforts are effective. Here are some examples of what they have to say:

?Don't change a thing!?

?The VA briefing was great!?

?The best I've had yet; he was funny, and it was nice to have a briefing from someone that was over there.?

?Outstanding, he took the time to help us and gives us a WELCOME HOME!!!?

?He was too long!?

?It was too short?

So, I guess that tells me it's not perfect, and we'll keep working on it.

On the first two weekends of the month, depending on their drill schedule, I travel to National Guard and Reserve units throughout the state. As of March 1, I have visited 20 units. Over 1,500 additional troops are to be visited with another 14 units, not counting the ones that are still deployed. It makes no difference whether they are from the Navy, Air Force, Marines, or Army, a veteran is a veteran. We also have units who returned before my outreach position was created; so I try and make sure we get to every veteran and make them aware of Vet Centers and of any VA benefits they may need.

On other weekends we go to family readiness meetings. The Family Readiness Group is made up of families from National Guard and Reserve units whose service men and women are deployed. The Family Readiness is under National Guard Bureau, though they consist of both Guard and Reserves families. We've attended eight meetings.

When I say ?we go,? I'm referring to my wife and me. My wife is a Vet Center volunteer. She has been asked by the readiness groups to come along so the wives of the deployed soldiers can ask her questions. She can relate to what they're dealing with. My role is to provide information about VA healthcare and benefits, be with soldiers' families, and tell them how important they are and what a great job they do caring for the homes and families of the deployed service man or woman. I find that family members write down and keep good notes on any information you have for them and they make sure the information is shared with the veterans.

In my outreach program, I also regularly speak to VFW, American Legion, and County Veterans Service Officers, as well as other civic groups. I like to network with these organizations, which may have our new veterans as their members and can contact us if one should need our help. We all know that these groups and organizations include Moms, Dads, and other relatives or friends of returning veterans who can serve as resources to give those veterans the support and direction if they should need our help. I like to post Vet Center information in the communities to promote the Vet Center services and make more people aware of our support to the veteran. As you can see, I have a very active and fulfilling job, where working a weekend is not like working on a weekend, where talking to veterans is like meeting new friends, and where family readiness meetings are like family reunions.

I would like to conclude by telling you that outside of my family, this is the most gratifying thing that I have ever had the pleasure of being a part of. I thank you, Mr. Chairman, and your Committee for allowing me to talk to you about one of the greatest jobs a veteran like myself could ever have.