

Chairman Sanders and members of the Committee, thank you for your invitation to discuss the Vermont Veterans Outreach Program. My name is Andre Wing, I have been the Vermont Veterans Outreach team leader since April 2010. In that time, my team has conducted “needs assessment” surveys with over 4300 veterans to discuss their needs and the needs of their families.

Before I begin, let me say that my testimony today reflects my personal views and does not necessarily reflect the views of the Army, the Department of Defense, or the Administration.

The Vermont Veterans Outreach Program has evolved and expanded beyond its original 2007 mandate of helping OIF/OEF service members. We now also assist service members from other war-time conflicts.

One of the reasons the Vermont Veterans Outreach program has been so successful is our grassroots, “sliding our feet under their kitchen tables” way of doing business. We are the ones going to the veterans’ home and working with them to find what they really need. The issues range from health care, emotional support, disability benefits, homelessness, employment, or financial assistance.

One of the most innovative components of our Veterans Outreach program is the VAMC liaison we established to help veterans navigate the VA system. Our liaison is located at the White River Junction Welcome Center which is the entry point into the VA system for Vermont. Our outreach specialists will often use this resource to establish a “soft” handoff to someone who understands how to navigate the VA system effectively. The liaison also works with many

“walk-ins” which are typically active duty veterans who come on their own not realizing how overwhelming the process could be.

In addition, the liaison attends the VA Patient Centered Care Committee which discusses ways to improve relationships with the veterans and how best to implement any changes recommended. Having the liaison attend these meetings helps our Veterans Outreach team learn of new initiatives the VA is implementing, as well as improve communication between the specialists out in the field and the VA.

We have increased awareness of the Vermont Outreach Program working through one of our community partners, VT 211, and our own 24/7 phone service. Calls will often come through these two services and allows us to act upon each situation in a very timely manner. Our outreach specialists established relationships with our Vermont State Police to go out with them to make “wellness calls” to assess a situation with a veteran and call upon professional services as needed.

I have established a strong rapport with the local OEF/OIF/OND Program Manager. This relationship has helped my team capture returning veterans that may have fallen through the cracks. An example of this would be that I received a call from a mother in Florida that works for Cabot Cheese. Her son, an OIF veteran was struggling in Florida with substance abuse and PTSD. She flew him to Vermont where we picked him up at the airport, brought him to the VAMC in WRJ, where he was enrolled in the 6 week Intensive Outpatient Program. My team also helped with an issue with a disability claim. The veteran completed the program successfully and is a contributing member of his community, now in Colorado. Without this kind

of partnership from the program manager, who facilitated care in Vermont, this veteran may not be here today. As a matter of fact, the mother told me that my team saved his life.

We are a very rural state that does not have any active duty military installations. Nor do we have an established public transportation infrastructure outside our largest county, Chittenden County.

For that reason, our Outreach Specialists transports our veterans to the White River Junction VA Medical Center, or the CBOCs throughout Vermont for their first couple of visits. While this “windshield time” reduced the time available to contact other veterans, Outreach Team members have noted that this drive time is, in reality, a short decompression period for the service member. Faced with the decision between helping a soldier right in front of them and those yet to be contacted, the Outreach Specialist always tends to the more immediate need. The person-to-person time spent by our Outreach Specialists with each individual service member and/or their family is a very important component of the program. . In the past many veterans would miss their appointments or didn’t bother enrolling because they could not afford the travel and/or didn’t have transportation and thereby jeopardizing their health or access to benefits.

A critical piece of our success is our follow-up with the service members .Our outreach specialists often meet with CBOC counselors and the service member to go over the follow-up plan needed for the veteran. It might be to make sure they show up for their follow up appointments at the VA, or getting them linked with a community partner such as Veterans, Inc. for financial help or with ESGR/DOL for employment issues. The bottom line is we establish

a relationship with these veterans and their families and we have the resources, skills and tenacity needed to make sure our veterans, from all combat conflicts, get the services they deserve.

Our hope is to continue this work until every service member and their family that needs help, gets help. Thank you for this opportunity to discuss Vermont's outreach program and I look forward to answering any questions you may have.