

Ronald L. Putnam, Haywood County Veteran Service Officer

INTRODUCTION:

This is the testimony of Ronald L. Putnam for the Senate Committee on Veterans Affairs on Rural Outreach for Veterans, June 16, 2010. I would like to thank the Chairman and ranking member and members of this committee for the opportunity to speak on Rural Outreach and to introduce myself.

My name is Ronald L. Putnam; I am the Haywood County Veteran Service Officer and the Director of Veterans Services in Haywood County, North Carolina. I served in the United States Marine Corps, the North Carolina Army National Guard, Army Reserve, and the North Carolina Air National Guard, and I retired from the North Carolina Air National Guard with a total of twenty four years of service. During my eleven years of active service with the Marine Corps, I served in combat in Beirut, Lebanon. I served during the first Gulf War as a Marine Corps Recruiter in Hickory, North Carolina. I was also called to Active Duty twice in support of Operation Noble Eagle while a member of the North Carolina Air National Guard. I am a member of the North Carolina Association of County Veteran's Officers; I am on The Executive Board, The Education Committee and The Legislative Committee of that association. I am also a member of The National Association of County Veterans Service Officers and I am the Chairman of the Washington Liaison Committee of that association. I am also a member of several national veteran organizations. I would like the Chairman and the members of this committee to know that I am honored to testify today and that I also think that it is my duty to do so, to the best of my ability.

BACKGROUND:

As the United States developed into a viable country in our distant past, most of the country remained rural in nature with a few population centers. This is particularly true in a large part of the United States, but applies equally throughout our great nation. The population centers developed into cities which, through their very nature, provide many services to their citizens. This is not unlike the Veterans Administration and their benefits delivery mission. Those who live in the population centers or cities are available to receive their benefits due to their close proximity to the service centers.

Realistically, it is not acceptable to require all of our nation's veterans to live in population centers if they wish to utilize the earned services and benefits that their military service has afforded them. The Department of Veterans Affairs recognized this issue early on and began developing Regional Offices and Medical Centers throughout the nation. Again, these were developed primarily in the population centers and those residing in rural America did not have the same benefit as those living nearer to the services being offered.

As our nation entered into one conflict and war after another, the population of veterans surged to historic levels and veteran benefits grew at the same time. After the end of World War II, many local governments took it upon themselves to develop veteran services at the State and County level. This was a good solution in some respects, but many local governments do not have funding mechanisms in place that can assist in paying for local services to veterans.

In the late 1970's, many local governments throughout the country went through tax revolts which severely limited available funding for discretionary spending. Rural America suffers more in poor budget years due to the lack of overall funding for services. Sadly, many local agencies view veteran services as a discretionary budget item. This resulted in many offices being consolidated into other governmental offices or eliminated completely; a sad commentary indeed.

Many veterans, particularly combat veterans, choose to live in rural, even remote areas. The experiences they lived through during their military service have left many of them with a sense of anger and inability to deal with other people. The rural areas of our country have become a sanctuary for many veterans who suffer from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and other service connected disabilities which adversely affect the veterans. Outreach has been frequently referred to as a solution to the problem.

Regardless of budget shortfalls and consolidation of services, many viable local veteran services operations have survived over the years. They remain in place and stand ready to assist the federal government in benefits delivery and claims management.

SOLUTIONS:

The National Association of County Veterans Service Officers is an organization made up of local government employees. Our members work for the local government offices and are tasked with assisting veterans in developing and processing their claims. County Veterans Service Offices exist to serve veterans and partner with State Veterans Service Offices, the National Service Organizations and the Department of Veterans Affairs to serve veterans. The National Association of County Veterans Service Officers views the local County Veterans Service Officer as an extension or arm of government, not unlike the VA itself.

If outreach has been referred to as a possible solution to the problem of bringing the veterans into the VA system of care, then NACVSO is a realistic solution to this problem. We live and work with the veterans of our nation every day. We are there in the communities.

Our member County Veteran Service Officers are present in 37 of our 50 states and located in over 700 local communities. This readily available workforce represents approximately 2,400 full time employees who are available to partner with Department of Veterans Affairs, Department of Defense and the Department of Labor to help speed the process of claims development and transition of our military personnel to civilian life.

Unfortunately, many of the County Offices in the rural areas have had severe financial problems in maintaining their offices. If the Veterans Administration is looking to develop outreach into the local communities, it only makes sense to look toward developing a closer relationship with local government at the state and county level. This could help solve the financial problems of the county offices and at the same time use the states to ensure compliance with proper use of funding and oversight for fund disbursement.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

There have been efforts in play to assist the rural veterans improve their access to Veterans Administration benefits. Some have involved legislation. Many bills have been introduced both

in the Senate and the House of Representative to establish outreach programs in most areas of the country. With the passing of public law 109-461 and 111-163 and your support for HR 3949 which is in this Senate committee would provide for funding to Rural County Veterans Service Offices to enhance outreach efforts throughout the nation that would greatly enhance the efforts of local county and state veteran officials throughout the country.

The National Association of County Veterans Service Officers strongly encourages you to support this and other veteran outreach bills. The veterans who live out in our communities and their dependents well being, depends on your support.

ACCOMPLISHMENTS:

I would like to report on the VA Rural Health Initiative in my county. The Public Affairs Officer for VA Rural Health Initiative at Charles George VAMC in Asheville N.C. Scott Pittillo has visited me on several occasions to talk about the objective of his departments' goal of reaching rural Veterans with education about VA Health Care services. We have talked about ideas to work together with other Veterans service officers and Veterans organizations to help reach the rural veterans in Western North Carolina. Although his team is just getting started it is very encouraging to me to see this kind of cooperation between the VA and local Veterans representatives.

SUMMARY:

Although, the objective of the rural health incentive is to reach rural veterans about their VA Health Care Benefits that they are eligible for and greatly deserve is a common goal for the VA and all State, County and National Service Organizations veteran service officer to work together in achieving this goal we invite this administration and congress to join with us in support of our efforts to reach these unique Veterans. Although a lot of the VA's current efforts to communicate more closely with veterans by utilizing, modern media, and technology, I want to remind both this committee and the Veterans Administration that their still a number of WWII, Korea, and Vietnam veterans that have unique education deficiencies and social disconnects, that make it extremely hard to receive the information that is being presented on these twenty-first century medians. I will remind this committee, the Veterans Administration, and all my colleagues, that the best communication with these veterans is face to face interaction with someone who is knowledgeable, well trained, and willing to assist these men and women that we owe such indebtedness to. Thank you for your attention to these matters. God bless this committee and the United States of American.