

**STATEMENT OF
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BEFORE THE
HOUSE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
SUBCOMMITTEE ON HEALTH**

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Good morning Chairwoman Brownley, Ranking Member Bergman, and Members of the Subcommittee. I appreciate the opportunity to discuss the readjustment counseling services available at Vet Centers. I am accompanied today by Dr. David Carroll, Executive Director, VHA Office of Mental Health and Suicide Prevention; Gillian Hinton McDonald, Director, Ventura Vet Center; and Al Ozanian, Deputy Chief Officer, Readjustment Counseling Service.

Readjustment Counseling Service (RCS) Vet Centers are community-based locations that offer readjustment counseling in a safe and confidential environment primarily to eligible Veterans and Service members, including the reserve component and National Guard members who served on active duty in a theater of combat operations or an area at a time during which hostilities occurred in that area, and their families. VA's authority has been expanded over time to include other cohorts of individuals as described in 38 U.S.C. § 1712A, including survivors of Military Sexual Trauma (MST), individuals who provided direct emergency medical or mental health care, or mortuary services to the casualties of combat operations or hostilities, unmanned aerial vehicle operators and crew members, individuals with active service in response to a national emergency or major disaster declared by the President or in the National Guard of a State under orders of the chief executive of that State in response to a disaster or civil disorder in such State, and members of the Coast Guard who participated in drug interdiction operations. RCS Vet Centers are an integral and valuable part of VHA's comprehensive service delivery system and play a key role in helping eligible individuals easily access needed readjustment counseling services and overcome barriers to other resources within VA and their communities.

Vet Centers have three major functions: (1) to provide direct counseling services, (2) to conduct outreach to Veterans and (3) provide referrals as authorized by law. A core value of RCS is to promote access to readjustment counseling services by helping eligible Veterans, Service members and their families overcome barriers that may impede them from using Vet Center services.

Purpose, Mission and Culture

RCS Vet Centers aid eligible Veterans and members of the Armed Forces, including members of the Reserve component and National Guard, in adjusting

successfully to life after having served in a combat theater or in an area in which hostilities occurred, experiencing military sexual trauma, (or having other qualifying service as described in 38 U.S.C. § 1712A). RCS reaches out to eligible Veterans and Service members, engages their communities and provides a broad range of readjustment counseling services, outreach and, in limited cases, referral services. Family members are also eligible for readjustment counseling services when it will assist in the Veteran's or Service member's successful readjustment to civilian life. Family members also may receive readjustment counseling services when needed to help them cope with the deployment of the Service member to a combat-theater or to an area in which hostilities are occurring. In addition, Vet Centers are, by law, situated apart from VA's general health care facilities.

The culture and environment of Vet Centers along with the military trauma-informed training of our staff intentionally allow for a supportive community that is non-stigmatizing and affirming, builds trust and is conducive to meeting the counseling needs of our clients. This model has been proven over time to have a significant and positive impact on the overall well-being of individuals served across RCS. It also uses a variety of different events and engagements with the stakeholder community. Many Vet Center services are delivered by staff (inter-disciplinary health professionals) who are also former combat-theater Veterans, thus fostering an empathic connection to the client.

Asset Definitions

RCS offers a broad range of services, including psychosocial assessment, individual counseling, group counseling, marital and family counseling for military-related readjustment issues and substance use disorder assessment. Vet Centers provide these services in RCS facilities and community and retreat settings. Vet Centers also provide consultation, counseling, training, services and bereavement services as described in 38 U.S.C. §§ 1782 and 1783, respectively. In addition, VA relies on Vet Centers to be a delivery site for military sexual trauma counseling authorized by 38 U.S.C. § 1720D. Other services include providing referrals for VA outpatient mental health services (available within the limits of VA facilities) if a VA licensed or certified mental health provider determines they are required for the client's successful readjustment, as authorized by 38 U.S.C. § 1712A(b)(1) as well as referral for community benefits or services to assist with an individual's readjustment needs.

RCS outreach services are provided broadly across communities to help identify eligible Veterans and Service members seeking Vet Center services. Readjustment counseling is provided through a Vet Center, Vet Center Outstation, Vet Center Community Access Point (CAP) or Mobile Vet Center (MVC), with the venue or delivery site determined by the projected demand in a particular community. These delivery sites, known as RCS assets, are available in every State, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, Guam, American Samoa, the United States Virgin Islands and the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands. Established in rural and urban communities, RCS has grown from a few established service locations in major cities to

a service comprised of 300 Vet Centers, 22 Vet Center Outstations, over 1,000 Vet Center CAPs (with the actual number fluctuating based upon demand) and 83 MVCs.

Vet Centers

Vet Centers are community-based counseling centers that provide the full range of RCS services. Vet Centers are in leased space in the community outside of the larger VA medical facilities and are staffed with an average of six staff per site, which includes supervisory, counseling, outreach and administrative staff. Vet Center staff do not diagnose clients, but rather staff work to identify client reported concerns and take a holistic and strength-based approach to address their readjustment concerns. The placement of Vet Centers within the community is intentional and is designed to maximize access for local Veterans, Service members and their families via all modes of transportation, such as public, private vehicle and/or pedestrian traffic. The RCS program seeks to mitigate barriers to accessing Vet Center services through the national implementation of non-traditional service hours (i.e., early mornings, evenings, weekends and holidays).

Vet Center Outstations

Vet Center Outstations are locations where at least one Vet Center counselor is permanently assigned to provide full time services in a community distant from one of the 300 Vet Centers. Vet Center Outstations typically are established in leased space as an adjunct to an existing Vet Center. Vet Center Outstations generally are located in rural communities where there is not a demonstrated need for a full Vet Center but where it is still important to reach an underserved population. These locations generally are staffed with a minimum of one to two Vet Center counselors and are designed to increase access to services by taking the Vet Center services to the communities where Veterans, Service members and their families live.

Vet Center Community Access Points (CAP)

Vet Center staff regularly deliver readjustment counseling services outside of the existing 300 "brick and mortar" Vet Centers and 22 RCS Outstations. Vet Center CAPs typically are located in donated space established in conjunction with a community partner to provide readjustment counseling services to a small number of Veterans, Service members and their families. These Vet Center CAPs may be staffed ranging from 1 day per month to several times per week depending on demand. Typically, the workload does not support a fulltime Vet Center employee for 5 days per week. The use of Vet Center CAPs allows RCS significant flexibility to stand-up new sites, or reallocate existing sites, to areas of high demand without requiring the lengthy contracting processes involved with the establishment of Vet Centers and Vet Center Outstations. Use of Vet Center CAPs allows RCS to rapidly respond to changing needs of the communities served. At the end of fiscal year (FY) 2021, RCS operated 1,026 Vet Center CAPs.

Mobile Vet Centers (MVC)

MVCs are used to take services to communities that are distant from a Vet Center or Vet Center Outstation and do not meet the requirements for one of the other asset types. In many instances, these communities are distant from existing services and are considered rural or highly rural. Staffing for these vehicles may include readjustment counselors or outreach specialists. MVCs can provide direct readjustment counseling, access to services offered at Vet Centers, assistance with benefits and rapid response to crisis situations. MVCs attempt to take advantage of community events where large gatherings of eligible individuals may be found.

Allocation of Vet Center Assets

RCS uses a demand-based model to determine asset types, service locations and subsequent staffing. Determining how to appropriately meet the needs of a community starts with determining the number of eligible Veterans, Service members and family members in that community and what type of readjustment counseling services they may be interested in. This process also considers the closest established Vet Center asset and the potential overlap of services. Other factors include assessment of need for daily, weekly or monthly services in the community; availability of space that can be used to provide the needed services; and ability to meet community needs with an MVC.

The use of Vet Center CAPs highlights RCS's ability to be flexible in determining service locations, allowing Vet Center staff to provide regularly scheduled services in high demand areas. In addition, if service demand decreases or shifts, this model allows RCS to easily shift service locations accordingly. As service use grows in a Vet Center CAP, RCS can convert these locations to Vet Center Outstations where staff will be permanently assigned to meet the increased service levels. If demand continues to grow beyond capabilities for a Vet Center Outstation, RCS can establish a full Vet Center. Every effort is made to tailor Vet Center services to the needs of the community. RCS works collaboratively with community partners to meet these needs in a manner that works best for eligible clients.

In FY 2021, RCS streamlined the process for opening new locations to allow for more rapid expansion in areas of high demand. RCS received approval in FY 2021 to add four new service locations in Saipan, Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands; Solano County, California; Leesburg, Virginia; and Sierra Vista, Arizona.

In addition, in FY 2021, the RCS partnered with the VHA Office of Enrollment and Forecasting to develop a Vet Center service demand forecasting model. This development was completed in December 2021, and RCS intends to use these projections to improve planning processes in FY 2022 and beyond related to future service use, geographical demand-based resource allocation/reallocation and budget requirements to meet projected demand and expansion (including staffing and infrastructure development). As demand is not evenly distributed across the country, the

model enables RCS to project unmet needs at the county level to inform resourcing at existing sites as well as adding new Vet Center assets. The demand forecasting model is a key component for RCS in finalizing the process of determining the locations of Vet Centers, Vet Center Outstations and Vet Center CAPs to address future shifts in the eligible population and demand.

Strengthening Delivery of Vet Center Services

FY 2020 and FY 2021 were unprecedented years for RCS due to the impacts of the global pandemic. Vet Centers provided readjustment counseling and outreach services to over 216,800 unique Veterans, Service members and their families in FY 2021. This number includes individuals who received any type of readjustment counseling services (counseling services, outreach and referral). The management of Vet Centers and the quality of services delivered remains an RCS priority. RCS continues to focus on increasing access to Vet Center services by addressing associated barriers. This focus includes the following: increasing services provided outside the "brick and mortar" Vet Center; offering non-traditional hours; increasing the use of telehealth readjustment counseling services; and developing Federal, State, and private-sector community partnerships to enhance the provision of services.

Offering non-traditional appointments assists clients in accessing quality readjustment counseling services in a way that meets their needs. Over 210,200 encounters occurred during non-traditional hours (before 8:00 a.m., after 4:30 p.m. or on weekends and holidays). Clients have reported favorable outcomes related to non-traditional appointments and that these services afford opportunities to engage in readjustment counseling where they would not otherwise be able to participate due to employment, education, family, distance and time constraints.

Telehealth readjustment counseling services are an additional means of getting services to those who may experience barriers to accessing services. In FY 2021, over 392,900 encounters were provided using telehealth modalities, a 137% increase over FY 2020. These increases in virtual visits represent the effort taken to provide alternative service modalities to ensure client needs were met with services in line with COVID-19 safety precautions. RCS also has seen an increase in younger and working clients engaging in virtually delivered Vet Center services. These clients now can schedule appointments during the day while on a lunch break at work, thus providing more flexibility in their busy schedules. Telehealth modalities also have been beneficial in more urban areas where commute times and traffic often limit access to readjustment counseling services for clients.

Vet Center staff and client input is an essential element in ensuring quality readjustment counseling services. RCS developed a process to obtain systematic feedback related to productivity expectations from Vet Center counselors and intends to initiate a staff survey in February 2022 to help inform potential actions for strengthening services. RCS also uses other multiple data sources to inform improvement processes, including data provided and received through customer feedback (VSignals); available

productivity and capacity data; and the annual All-Employee Survey results. RCS currently is working with VHA's National Center for Organizational Development and VA's Veterans Experience Office, among others. In addition, Vet Centers are subject to a yearly clinical and administrative oversight visit to monitor quality of readjustment counseling services. District leadership conducts site visits to ensure adherence to RCS standards. Any deficiencies documented during the review are subject to remediation. All 300 Vet Center site visits for FY 2021 were completed.

In FY 2021, RCS implemented a large-scale organizational training initiative that ensures staff have access to resources to enhance their knowledge, skills and abilities to meet the needs of individuals served. This initiative includes the creation of position specific training modules, leadership development for all levels of the enterprise and a virtual clinical supervision for licensure program.

The use of versatile, highly responsive MVC teams represents a highly effective and impactful outreach and direct service platform. A major strength of MVC operations is the flexibility to respond to changing environments and provide support for VA's Fourth Mission to improve the Nation's preparedness for response to war, terrorism, national emergencies and natural disasters by developing plans and taking actions to ensure continued service to Veterans, as well as to support national, State, and local emergency management, public health, safety and homeland security efforts. In FY 2021, MVC teams completed nearly 90 deployments for emergency response and COVID vaccination efforts. MVC teams deployed throughout the country to support VA vaccination efforts by supporting mobile vaccination clinics. In addition, MVC teams helped augment vaccination efforts with key community stakeholders such as the Federal Emergency Management Agency; the Indian Health Service; the National Guard Bureau; and local State Adjutant Commands, and local State Emergency Management Command Cells. In addition, MVC teams mobilized twice, rotating teams from local Vet Centers to augment three MVCs deployed to the United States Capitol. These deployments provided critical support to the United States Capitol Police and National Guard and Reserve forces from throughout the country deployed in security of the Nation's capital in what was a very difficult year for these entities. Across these deployments, RCS provided support to 12,331 Veterans, 1,174 Service members, 1,315 family members, 4,071 civilians and 192 U.S. Capitol Police officers. We are honored to provide emergency management support and much-needed assistance to local communities to the extent authorized by law.

VA is grateful for independent reviews to improve vital Vet Center services and outreach conducted by the Office of Inspector General (OIG) and Government Accountability Office (GAO). The recently started annual OIG Vet Center Inspection Program will focus on a number of aspects of the RCS program. Recently, GAO also has focused on RCS staff modeling and workload. We are actively developing action plans and addressing the recommendations from these reviews.

Conclusion

RCS can meet the current demand for readjustment counseling services and currently is funded adequately to provide the necessary support, space, equipment and travel to support its mission. To plan for staffing needs associated with increased demand, RCS has implemented a staffing tool to meet client needs more accurately. Data obtained from new population and demand forecasting models will enable RCS to develop more accurate projections for resources required to meet needs related to staffing, service locations and infrastructure.

VA is committed to providing quality readjustment counseling services and enhancing the well-being of Veterans, Service members and their families. We appreciate the continued support of Congress for this vital service to eligible individuals.

Chairwoman Brownley, this concludes my testimony. My colleagues and I are prepared to answer any questions.