

Good afternoon, I'd like to thank the subcommittee for holding this hearing today, and offering me this opportunity to advocate for increased Vet Center access through my bill, the Vet CENTERS for Mental Health Act. I want to offer my thanks to this subcommittee's Chair Representative Brownley, and Ranking Member Bergman. I also want to thank one of my partners on this piece of legislation, Representative Sablan, who sits on this subcommittee, as well as give my thanks to Committee Chairman Takano, who has graciously supported this bill.

I know that the bipartisan members of this committee are well aware of the mental health challenges our veterans face, particularly our combat veterans and those veterans who have experienced sexual assault. I also know that this committee is well aware of the important work done by the mental health professionals at our nation's Vet Centers to serve those veterans.

Vet Centers are routinely identified as the most successful, and therefore coveted, parts of our VA health system. However, for a host of reasons like shifting populations or accidents of history, some veterans have been locked out of easy access to the benefits of our Vet Centers. For example, the veteran constituents of our colleague Representative Sablan in the Northern Mariana Islands currently have no easy access to VA mental health services whatsoever, and are left only with options that require expensive airfare and overnight accommodations, hundreds of dollars from their own pockets, to access in-person support.

That experience is the extreme - but it's indicative of the challenges that many veterans all across the country must overcome to access the care they need.

In my home state of New Jersey, we have the highest population density among the states, 11th largest in population despite being the 4th smallest. Our veterans may not need to get on a plane to make it to their appointments but they do need to fight traffic, inconsistent public transportation access, expensive toll roads, and other obstacles that make it impractical or impossible to consistently make it to badly-needed appointments.

Even in states like North Carolina, the ratio of veterans to Vet Centers is nearly double the national average despite the robust military presence in that state, and in California and Illinois, the combination of sprawling metropolitan areas with rural agricultural areas create challenges for those diverse communities to access services.

Unfortunately, because of these obstacles, whether in New Jersey or the Northern Marianas Islands, whether North Carolina or Illinois, many veterans are forced to choose to forgo, or simply are unable to access, Vet Center services that could save their lives.

My bill provides an answer: a modest but strategic increase in the number of Vet Center locations in states that face challenges like these. Our solution amounts to a less-than-4% increase to the total of 300 Vet Centers nation-wide that will make a world of difference to these veterans. All of the states and territories I've mentioned, as well as the underserved states of Minnesota, Ohio, Virginia, Florida, Maryland, and Pennsylvania, states home to 8 million veterans would see an additional Vet Center as a result of my bill.

Earlier this year I was honored to be a cosponsor on Representative Axne's Sgt. Ketchum Rural Veterans Mental Health Act, coled by Representative Miller-Meeks, who sits on this subcommittee. That critically important bill increased much-needed mental resources for veterans in rural areas. New Jersey may not have as many rural areas as Iowa, but just like Iowa, just like the Northern Mariana Islands, North Carolina, Illinois, California, Pennsylvania, and Florida, our veterans deserve increased access to potentially life-saving services and unique solutions to combat their current challenges.

I humbly ask for your support of my bill, and thank you.