



PRESS RELEASE

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VVA Applauds Legislation to Expand Vet Center Access to Underserved Veterans; Vet Centers Save Lives

(Washington, D.C.) – “Vietnam Veterans of America applauds Rep. Mikie Sherrill (NJ-11) and the bipartisan coalition of House Members for introducing the *Vet CENTERS for Mental Health Act*, H.R.5543, which calls for the expansion of the Vet Center program to areas where veterans are without access to mental health care and other critical services needed for their transition home,” said John Rowan, VVA National president. “This important legislation, when enacted, will add twelve 12 Vet Centers, providing life-saving services to veterans in rural and densely populated urban areas, as well as the Northern Mariana Islands.”

“Vietnam veterans know only too well the critical role the Vet Center plays in helping veterans reintegrate into civil society,” said Rowan. “In the early days after our return, Vietnam veterans were distrustful of the VA and wary of seeking help for their mental-health issues at VA facilities. The storefront counseling centers, “Vet Centers,” staffed by veterans and offering free, walk-in peer counseling, were established in the community as a way of circumventing the need to visit a VA campus. Simply put, the Vet Centers have saved the lives of many of our fellow veterans by providing the counseling and readjustment services in the safety of our own communities.”

“We fought hard to have the Vet Centers recognize the importance of including the family of the veteran in the veteran’s readjustment, and today services are available for both the veteran’s family as well as bereavement services to families of servicemembers who die on duty,” noted Rowan.

“In 1979, the Vet Center Program was introduced as part of the *Vietnam Veterans Readjustment Counseling Act*, and continued until, in 1987, the VA attempted to relocate the Vet Centers to the campuses of the VA,” said Rowan. “With the help of the courts, VVA secured an injunction against the VA. And thanks to our allies on Capitol Hill, we were then able to secure a unanimous vote in Congress to permanently bar VA from relocating Vet Centers from the community to its medical facilities.

“Our support for the Vet Centers has never wavered,” said Rowan. “We routinely survey our members regarding their experiences to ensure the Vet Centers are meeting the needs of our veterans.” Today, over 300,000 veterans, servicemembers, and families receive counseling at VA’s 300 Vet Centers and 80 Mobile Vet Centers. We applaud the intent of this legislation to ensure access to all veterans in need of mental health counseling, and we encourage the further expansion of this program in those areas where there is none.”

In addition to calling for a Vet Center in the Northern Mariana Islands, where veterans must leave the island to access mental-health care, H.R. 5543 calls for Vet Centers in eleven states with established need: New Jersey; Iowa; North Carolina; California; Illinois; Minnesota; Ohio; Florida; Maryland; Pennsylvania; and Virginia.

Vietnam Veterans of America (VVA) is the nation’s only congressionally chartered veterans service organization dedicated to the needs of Vietnam-era veterans and their families. VVA’s founding principle is “Never again will one generation of veterans abandon another.”