

SEC. 5126. IMPROVEMENT OF VET CENTERS AT DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS.

(a) PRODUCTIVITY EXPECTATIONS FOR READJUSTMENT COUNSELORS OF VET CENTERS.—

(1) EVALUATION OF PRODUCTIVITY EXPECTATIONS.—Not later than one year after the date of the enactment of this Act, the Secretary of Veterans Affairs shall evaluate productivity expectations for readjustment counselors of Vet Centers, including by obtaining systematic feedback from counselors on such expectations, including with respect to following:

(A) Any potential effects of productivity expectations, whether positive or negative, on client care and the welfare of readjustment counselors.

(B) Distances readjustment counselors may travel to

appointments, especially with respect to serving rural veterans.

(C) The possibility that some veterans may not want to use nor benefit from telehealth or group counseling.

(D) Availability and access of veteran populations to broadband and telehealth.

(E) Any effect of productivity expectations on readjustment counselors, including with respect to recruitment,

retention, and welfare.

(F) Whether productivity expectations provide incentives or pressure to inaccurately report client visits.

(G) Whether directors and readjustment counselors of Vet Centers need additional training or guidance on how productivity expectations are calculated.

(H) Such other criteria as the Secretary considers appropriate.

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(2) SYSTEMATIC FEEDBACK.—

(A) IN GENERAL.—The Secretary shall—

(i) make every effort to ensure that all readjustment counselors of Vet Centers are given the opportunity to fully provide feedback, positive or negative,

including through a survey containing open- and close-ended questions, on all items under paragraph (1);

(ii) in obtaining feedback under paragraph (1),

ensure that the items under paragraph (1) are adequately and completely addressed in a way that permits responses to be relevant to the evaluation of

productivity expectations;

(iii) collect and safely store the feedback obtained

under paragraph (1)—

(I) in an electronic database that cannot be altered by any party;

(II) in an anonymized manner, in order to protect the privacy of each respondent; and

(III) in a manner that allows for evaluation by third parties of the feedback, such as audit of the feedback by the Government Accountability Office; and

(iv) provide the feedback obtained under paragraph (1) in an anonymized manner to the working group established under subsection (c).

(B) GOVERNMENT ACCOUNTABILITY OFFICE AUDIT.—Not less frequently than once each year during the five-year period beginning on the date of the enactment of this Act, the Comptroller General of the United States shall audit the feedback obtained from readjustment counselors of Vet Centers under paragraph (1).

(3) IMPLEMENTATION OF CHANGES.—Not later than 90 days after the date of the completion of the evaluation required by paragraph (1), the Secretary shall implement any needed

changes to the productivity expectations described in such paragraph in order to ensure—

(A) quality of care and access to care for veterans;
and

(B) the welfare of readjustment counselors.

(4) REPORT TO CONGRESS.—Not later than 180 days after

the date of the completion of the evaluation required by paragraph (1), the Secretary shall submit to Congress a report

on—

(A) the findings of the evaluation; and

(B) any planned or implemented changes described in paragraph (3).

(5) PLAN FOR REASSESSMENT AND IMPLEMENTATION.—

(A) PLAN.—Not later than one year after the date of the enactment of this Act, the Secretary shall develop and implement a plan for—

(i) reassessing productivity expectations for readjustment counselors of Vet Centers, in consultation with such counselors; and

(ii) implementing any needed changes to such expectations, as the Secretary determines appropriate.

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(B) REASSESSMENTS.—Under the plan required by

subparagraph (A), the Secretary shall conduct a reassessment described in such paragraph not less frequently than

once each year.

(b) STAFFING MODEL FOR VET CENTERS.—

(1) IN GENERAL.—Not later than one year after the date of the enactment of this Act, the Secretary of Veterans Affairs

shall develop and implement a staffing model for Vet Centers that incorporates key practices in the design of such staffing model.

(2) ELEMENTS.—In developing the staffing model under paragraph (1), the Secretary shall—

(A) involve key stakeholders, including readjustment

counselors, outreach specialists, and directors of Vet Centers;

(B) incorporate key work activities and the frequency and time required to conduct such activities;

(C) ensure the data used in the model is high quality to provide assurance that staffing estimates are reliable; and

(D) incorporate—

(i) risk factors, including case complexity;

(ii) geography;

(iii) availability, advisability, and willingness of veterans to use telehealth or group counseling; and

(iv) such other factors as the Secretary considers appropriate.

(3) PLAN FOR ASSESSMENTS AND UPDATES.—Not later than one year after the date of the enactment of this Act, the Secretary shall develop a plan for—

(A) assessing and updating the staffing model developed and implemented under paragraph (1) not less frequently than once every four years; and

(B) implementing any needed changes to such model,
as the Secretary determines appropriate.

(c) WORKING GROUP OF READJUSTMENT COUNSELORS, OUT-
REACH SPECIALISTS, AND DIRECTORS OF VET CENTERS.—

(1) IN GENERAL.—In conducting the evaluation of produc-
tivity expectations under subsection (a) (1) and developing the

staffing model for Vet Centers under subsection (b)(1), the
Secretary of Veterans Affairs shall establish a working group
to assess—

(A) the efficacy, impact, and composition of perform-
ance metrics for such expectations with respect to—

(i) quality of care and access to care for veterans;
and

(ii) the welfare of readjustment counselors and
other employees of Vet Centers; and

(B) key considerations for the development of such
staffing model, including with respect to—

(i) quality of care and access to care for veterans
and other individuals eligible for care through Vet
Centers; and

(ii) recruitment, retention, and welfare of
employees of Vet Centers.

(2) MEMBERSHIP.—The working group established under paragraph (1) shall be composed of readjustment counselors, outreach specialists, and directors of Vet Centers.

(3) FEEDBACK AND RECOMMENDATIONS.—The working group established under paragraph (1) shall provide to the Secretary—

(A) feedback from readjustment counselors, outreach specialists, and directors of Vet Centers; and

(B) recommendations on how to improve—

(i) quality of care and access to care for veterans;

and

(ii) the welfare of readjustment counselors and other employees of Vet Centers.

(d) IMPROVEMENTS OF HIRING PRACTICES AT VET CENTERS.—

(1) STANDARDIZATION OF POSITION DESCRIPTIONS.—

(A) IN GENERAL.—Not later than one year after the date of the enactment of this Act, the Secretary of Veterans

Affairs shall standardize descriptions of position responsibilities at Vet Centers.

(B) REPORTING REQUIREMENT.—In each of the first two annual reports submitted under section 7309(e) of title 38, United States Code, after the date of the enactment of this Act, the Secretary shall include a description of

the actions taken by the Secretary to carry out subparagraph (A).

(2) EXPANSION OF REPORTING REQUIREMENTS ON READJUST-
MENT COUNSELING TO INCLUDE ACTIONS TO REDUCE STAFFING

VACANCIES AND TIME TO HIRE.—Section 7309(e)(2) of title 38,
United States Code, is amended by adding at the end the
following new subparagraph:

“(D) A description of actions taken by the Secretary to
reduce—

“(i) vacancies in counselor positions in the Readjust-
ment Counseling Service; and

“(ii) the time it takes to hire such counselors.”.

(e) REPORT BY GOVERNMENT ACCOUNTABILITY OFFICE ON VET
CENTER INFRASTRUCTURE AND FUTURE INVESTMENTS.—

(1) IN GENERAL.—Not later than one year after the date
of the enactment of this Act, the Comptroller General of the
United States shall submit to Congress a report on physical

infrastructure and future investments with respect to Vet Cen-
ters.

(2) ELEMENTS.—The report required by paragraph (1) shall
include the following:

(A) An assessment of—

(i) the condition of the physical infrastructure of
all assets of Vet Centers, whether owned or leased
by the Department of Veterans Affairs; and

(ii) the short-, medium-, and long-term plans of the Department to maintain and upgrade the physical infrastructure of Vet Centers to address the operational needs of Vet Centers as of the date of the submittal of the report and future needs.

(B) An assessment of management and strategic planning for the physical infrastructure of Vet Centers,

including whether the Department should buy or lease existing or additional locations in areas with stable or growing populations of veterans.

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(C) An assessment of whether, as of the date of the submittal of the report, Vet Center buildings, mobile Vet

Centers, community access points, and similar infrastructure are sufficient to care for veterans or if such infrastructure is negatively affecting care due to limited space for

veterans and Vet Center personnel or other factors.

(D) An assessment of the areas with the greatest need for investments in—

(i) improved physical infrastructure, including upgraded Vet Centers; or

(ii) additional physical infrastructure for Vet Cen-

ters, including new Vet Centers owned or leased by

the Department.

(E) A description of the authorities and resources that

may be required for the Secretary to make such investments.

(F) A review of all annual reports submitted under 7309(e) of title 38, United States Code, before the date of the submittal of the report under paragraph (1).

(f) PILOT PROGRAM TO COMBAT FOOD INSECURITY AMONG VETERANS AND FAMILY MEMBERS OF VETERANS.—

(1) IN GENERAL.—Not later than 18 months after the date of the enactment of this Act, the Secretary of Veterans Affairs shall establish a pilot program to award grants to eligible entities to support partnerships that address food insecurity among veterans and family members of veterans who receive services through Vet Centers or other facilities of the Department as determined by the Secretary.

(2) DURATION OF PILOT.—The Secretary shall carry out the pilot program for a three-year period beginning on the date of the establishment of the pilot program.

(3) TRAINING AND TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE.—The Secretary may provide eligible entities receiving grant funding under

the pilot program with training and technical assistance on the provision of food insecurity assistance services to veterans and family members of veterans.

(4) ELIGIBLE ENTITIES.—For purposes of the pilot program, an eligible entity is—

- (A) a nonprofit organization;
- (B) an organization recognized by the Secretary for the representation of veterans under section 5902 of title 38, United States Code;
- (C) a public agency;
- (D) a community-based organization; or
- (E) an institution of higher education.

(5) APPLICATION.—An eligible entity seeking a grant under the pilot program shall submit to the Secretary an application therefor at such time, in such manner, and containing such information and commitments as the Secretary may require.

(6) SELECTION.—The Secretary shall select eligible entities that submit applications under paragraph (5) for the award of grants under the pilot program using a competitive process that takes into account the following:

- (A) Capacity of the applicant entity to serve veterans and family members of veterans.
- (B) Demonstrated need of the population the applicant entity would serve.

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- (C) Demonstrated need of the applicant entity for assistance from the grant.

(D) Such other criteria as the Secretary considers appropriate.

(7) DISTRIBUTION.—The Secretary shall ensure, to the extent practicable, an equitable geographic distribution of grants awarded under this subsection.

(8) MINIMUM PROGRAM REQUIREMENTS.—Any grant awarded under this subsection shall be used—

(A) to coordinate with the Secretary with respect to the provision of assistance to address food insecurity among veterans and family members of veterans described in paragraph (1);

(B) to increase participation in nutrition counseling programs and provide educational materials and counseling to veterans and family members of veterans to address food insecurity and healthy diets among those individuals;

(C) to increase access to and enrollment in Federal assistance programs, including the supplemental nutrition assistance program under the Food and Nutrition Act of 2008 (7 U.S.C. 2011 et seq.), the special supplemental

nutrition program for women, infants, and children established by section 17 of the Child Nutrition Act of 1966

(42 U.S.C. 1786), the low-income home energy assistance program established under the Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Act of 1981 (42 U.S.C. 8621 et seq.), and any other assistance program that the Secretary considers

advisable; and

(D) to fulfill such other criteria as the Secretary considers appropriate to further the purpose of the grant and

serve veterans.

(9) PROVISION OF INFORMATION.—Each entity that receives a grant under this subsection shall provide to the Secretary, at least once each year during the duration of the grant term, data on—

(A) the number of veterans and family members of veterans screened for, and enrolled in, programs described in subparagraphs (B) and (C) of paragraph (8);

(B) other services provided by the entity to veterans and family members of veterans using funds from the grant; and

(C) such other data as the Secretary may require.

(10) REPORT ON DATA COLLECTED.—For each year of operation of the pilot program, the Secretary shall submit to the

appropriate committees of Congress a report on the data collected under paragraph (9) during such year.

(11) GOVERNMENT ACCOUNTABILITY OFFICE REPORT.—

(A) IN GENERAL.—Not later than one year after the

date on which the pilot program terminates, the Comptroller General of the United States shall submit to Con-

gress a report evaluating the effectiveness and outcomes

of the activities carried out under this subsection in

reducing food insecurity among veterans and family members of veterans.

(B) ELEMENTS.—The report required by subparagraph

(A) shall include the following:

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(i) A summary of the activities carried out under this subsection.

(ii) An assessment of the effectiveness and outcomes of the grants awarded under this subsection,

including with respect to eligibility screening contacts, application assistance consultations, and changes in food insecurity among the population served by the grant.

(iii) Best practices regarding the use of partnerships to improve the effectiveness and outcomes of

public benefit programs to address food insecurity among veterans and family members of veterans.

(iv) An assessment of the feasibility and advis-

ability of making the pilot program permanent and

expanding to other locations.

(12) AUTHORIZATION OF APPROPRIATIONS.—

(A) IN GENERAL.—There is authorized to be appropriated to carry out the pilot program established under

paragraph (1) \$15,000,000 for each fiscal year in which the program is carried out, beginning with the fiscal year in which the program is established.

(B) ADMINISTRATIVE EXPENSES.—Of the amounts authorized to be appropriated under subparagraph (A), not more than ten percent may be used for administrative expenses of the Department of Veterans Affairs associated with administering grants under this subsection.

(13) DEFINITIONS.—In this subsection:

(A) The term “appropriate committees of Congress” means—

(i) the Committee on Veterans’ Affairs, the Committee on Appropriations, and the Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry of the Senate; and

(ii) the Committee on Veterans’ Affairs, the Committee on Appropriations, and the Committee on Agriculture of the House of Representatives.

(B) The term “facilities of the Department” has the

meaning given that term in section 1701(3) of title 38, United States Code.

(C) The term “institution of higher education” has the meaning given that term in section 101 of the Higher Education Act of 1965 (20 U.S.C. 1001).

(D) The term “public agency” means a department, agency, other unit, or instrumentality of Federal, State, Tribal, or local government.

(E) The term “State” has the meaning given that term in section 101(20) of title 38, United States Code.

(F) The term “veteran” means an individual who served in the Armed Forces, including an individual who served in a reserve component of the Armed Forces, and who was discharged or released therefrom, regardless of the conditions of such discharge or release.

(g) DEFINITION OF VET CENTER.—In this section, the term “Vet Center” has the meaning given that term in section 1712A(h) of title 38, United States Code.