

117TH CONGRESS
1ST SESSION

S. 1944

To improve Vet Centers of the Department of Veterans Affairs, and for other purposes.

IN THE SENATE OF THE UNITED STATES

MAY 27, 2021

Mr. REED (for himself and Mr. TESTER) introduced the following bill; which was read twice and referred to the Committee on Veterans' Affairs

A BILL

To improve Vet Centers of the Department of Veterans Affairs, and for other purposes.

1 *Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representa-*
2 *tives of the United States of America in Congress assembled,*

3 **SECTION 1. SHORT TITLE.**

4 This Act may be cited as the “Vet Center Improve-
5 ment Act of 2021”.

6 **SEC. 2. DEFINITIONS.**

7 In this Act:

8 (1) VET CENTER.—The term “Vet Center” has
9 the meaning given that term in section 1712A(h) of
10 title 38, United States Code.

1 (2) VETERANS SERVICE ORGANIZATION.—The
2 term “veterans service organization” means an orga-
3 nization recognized by the Secretary of Veterans Af-
4 fairs for the representation of veterans under section
5 5902 of title 38, United States Code.

6 **SEC. 3. PRODUCTIVITY EXPECTATIONS FOR READJUST-**
7 **MENT COUNSELORS OF VET CENTERS.**

8 (a) EVALUATION OF PRODUCTIVITY EXPECTA-
9 TIONS.—Not later than one year after the date of the en-
10 actment of this Act, the Secretary of Veterans Affairs
11 shall evaluate productivity expectations for readjustment
12 counselors of Vet Centers, including by obtaining system-
13 atic feedback from counselors on such expectations, in-
14 cluding with respect to following:

15 (1) Any potential effects of productivity expecta-
16 tions, whether positive or negative, on client care.

17 (2) Distances readjustment counselors may
18 travel to appointments, especially with respect to
19 serving rural veterans.

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

23 (4) Availability and access of veteran popu-
24 lations to broadband and telehealth.

1 (5) Any effect of productivity expectations on
2 readjustment counselors, including with respect to
3 recruitment, retention, and welfare.

4 (6) Whether productivity expectations provide
5 incentives or pressure to inaccurately report client
6 visits.

7 (7) Whether directors and readjustment coun-
8 selors of Vet Centers need additional training or
9 guidance on how productivity expectations are cal-
10 culated.

11 (8) Such other criteria as the Secretary con-
12 siders appropriate.

13 (b) SYSTEMATIC FEEDBACK.—

14 (1) IN GENERAL.—The Secretary shall—

15 (A) make every effort to ensure that all re-
16 adjustment counselors of Vet Centers are given
17 the opportunity to fully provide feedback, posi-
18 tive or negative, on all items under subsection
19 (a);

20 (B) collect and safely store the feedback
21 obtained under subsection (a)—

22 (i) in an electronic database that can-
23 not be altered by any party;

1 (ii) in an anonymized manner, in
2 order to protect the privacy of each re-
3 spondent; and

4 (iii) in a manner that allows for eval-
5 uation by third parties of the feedback,
6 such as audit of the feedback by the Gov-
7 ernment Accountability Office; and

8 (C) provide the feedback obtained under
9 subsection (a) in an anonymized manner to the
10 working group established under section 5.

11 (2) GOVERNMENT ACCOUNTABILITY OFFICE
12 AUDIT.—Not less frequently than once each year
13 during the five-year period beginning on the date of
14 the enactment of this Act, the Comptroller General
15 of the United States shall audit the feedback ob-
16 tained from readjustment counselors of Vet Centers
17 under subsection (a).

18 (c) IMPLEMENTATION OF CHANGES.—Not later than
19 90 days after the date of the completion of the evaluation
20 required by subsection (a), the Secretary shall implement
21 any needed changes to the productivity expectations de-
22 scribed in such subsection in order to ensure—

23 (1) quality of care and access to care for vet-
24 erans; and

25 (2) the welfare of readjustment counselors.

1 (d) REPORT TO CONGRESS.—Not later than 180 days
2 after the date of the completion of the evaluation required
3 by subsection (a), the Secretary shall submit to Congress
4 a report on—

- 5 (1) the findings of the evaluation; and
6 (2) any planned or implemented changes de-
7 scribed in subsection (c).

8 (e) PLAN FOR REASSESSMENT AND IMPLEMENTA-
9 TION.—

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

13 (A) reassessing productivity expectations
14 for readjustment counselors of Vet Centers, in
15 consultation with such counselors; and

16 (B) implementing any needed changes to
17 such expectations, as the Secretary determines
18 appropriate.

19 (2) REASSESSMENTS.—Under the plan required
20 by paragraph (1), the Secretary shall conduct a re-
21 assessment described in such paragraph not less fre-
22 quently than once each year.

23 **SEC. 4. STAFFING MODEL FOR VET CENTERS.**

24 (a) IN GENERAL.—Not later than one year after the
25 date of the enactment of this Act, the Secretary of Vet-

1 erans Affairs shall develop and implement a staffing model
2 for Vet Centers that incorporates key practices in the de-
3 sign of such staffing model.

4 (b) ELEMENTS.—In developing the staffing model
5 under subsection (a), the Secretary shall—

6 (1) involve key stakeholders, including readjust-
7 ment counselors, outreach specialists, and directors
8 of Vet Centers;

9 (2) incorporate key work activities and the fre-
10 quency and time required to conduct such activities;

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

14 (4) incorporate—

15 (A) risk factors, including case complexity;

16 (B) geography;

17 (C) availability, advisability, and willing-
18 ness of veterans to use telehealth or group
19 counseling; and

20 (D) such other factors as the Secretary
21 considers appropriate.

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

1 (1) assessing and updating the staffing model
2 developed and implemented under subsection (a) not
3 less frequently than once every four years; and

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

6 **SEC. 5. WORKING GROUP OF READJUSTMENT COUN-**
7 **SELORS, OUTREACH SPECIALISTS, AND DI-**
8 **RECTORS OF VET CENTERS.**

9 (a) IN GENERAL.—In conducting the evaluation of
10 productivity expectations under section 3(a) and devel-
11 oping the staffing model for Vet Centers under section
12 4(a), the Secretary of Veterans Affairs shall establish a
13 working group to assess—

14 (1) the efficacy, impact, and composition of per-
15 formance metrics for such expectations with respect
16 to—

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

19 (B) the welfare of readjustment counselors
20 and other employees of Vet Centers; and

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

23 (A) quality of care and access to care for
24 veterans and other individuals eligible for care
25 through Vet Centers; and

1 (B) recruitment, retention, and welfare of
2 employees of Vet Centers.

3 (b) MEMBERSHIP.—The working group established
4 under subsection (a) shall be composed of readjustment
5 counselors, outreach specialists, and directors of Vet Cen-
6 ters.

7 (c) FEEDBACK AND RECOMMENDATIONS.—The
8 working group established under subsection (a) shall pro-
9 vide to the Secretary—

10 (1) feedback from readjustment counselors, out-
11 reach specialists, and directors of Vet Centers; and

12 (2) recommendations on how to improve—

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

15 (B) the welfare of readjustment counselors
16 and other employees of Vet Centers.

17 **SEC. 6. IMPROVEMENTS OF HIRING PRACTICES AT VET**
18 **CENTERS.**

19 (a) STANDARDIZATION OF POSITION DESCRIP-
20 TIONS.—

21 (1) IN GENERAL.—Not later than one year
22 after the date of the enactment of this Act, the Sec-
23 retary of Veterans Affairs shall standardize descrip-
24 tions of position responsibilities at Vet Centers.

1 (2) REPORTING REQUIREMENT.—In each of the
 2 first two annual reports submitted under section
 3 7309(e) of title 38, United States Code, after the
 4 date of the enactment of this Act, the Secretary
 5 shall include a description of the actions taken by
 6 the Secretary to carry out paragraph (1).

7 (b) EXPANSION OF REPORTING REQUIREMENTS ON
 8 READJUSTMENT COUNSELING TO INCLUDE ACTIONS TO
 9 REDUCE STAFFING VACANCIES AND TIME TO HIRE.—
 10 Section 7309(e)(2) of title 38, United States Code, is
 11 amended by adding at the end the following new subpara-
 12 graph:

13 “(D) A description of actions taken by the Sec-
 14 retary to reduce—

15 “(i) vacancies in counselor positions in the
 16 Readjustment Counseling Service; and

17 “(ii) the time it takes to hire such coun-
 18 selors.”.

19 **SEC. 7. REPORT BY GOVERNMENT ACCOUNTABILITY OF-**
 20 **FICE ON VET CENTER INFRASTRUCTURE AND**
 21 **FUTURE INVESTMENTS.**

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

1 on physical infrastructure and future investments with re-
2 spect to Vet Centers.

3 (b) ELEMENTS.—The report required by subsection
4 (a) shall include the following:

5 (1) An assessment of—

6 (A) the condition of the physical infra-
7 structure of all assets of Vet Centers, whether
8 owned or leased by the Department of Veterans
9 Affairs; and

10 (B) the short-, medium-, and long-term
11 plans of the Department to maintain and up-
12 grade the physical infrastructure of Vet Centers
13 to address the operational needs of Vet Centers
14 as of the date of the submittal of the report and
15 future needs.

16 (2) An assessment of management and stra-
17 tegic planning for the physical infrastructure of Vet
18 Centers, including whether the Department should
19 buy or lease existing or additional locations in areas
20 with stable or growing populations of veterans.

21 (3) An assessment of whether, as of the date of
22 the submittal of the report, Vet Center buildings,
23 mobile Vet Centers, community access points, and
24 similar infrastructure are sufficient to care for vet-
25 erans or if such infrastructure is negatively affecting

1 care due to limited space for veterans and Vet Cen-
2 ter personnel or other factors.

3 (4) An assessment of the areas with the great-
4 est need for investments in—

5 (A) improved physical infrastructure, in-
6 cluding upgraded Vet Centers; or

7 (B) additional physical infrastructure for
8 Vet Centers, including new Vet Centers owned
9 or leased by the Department.

10 (5) A description of the authorities and re-
11 sources that may be required for the Secretary to
12 make such investments.

13 (6) A review of all annual reports submitted
14 under 7309(e) of title 38, United States Code, be-
15 fore the date of the submittal of the report under
16 subsection (a).

17 **SEC. 8. PILOT PROGRAM TO COMBAT FOOD INSECURITY**
18 **AMONG VETERANS AND FAMILY MEMBERS**
19 **OF VETERANS.**

20 (a) IN GENERAL.—Not later than one year after the
21 date of the enactment of this Act, the Secretary of Vet-
22 erans Affairs shall establish a pilot program to award
23 grants to eligible entities to support partnerships that ad-
24 dress food insecurity among veterans and family members
25 of veterans who receive services through Vet Centers or

1 other facilities of the Department as determined by the
2 Secretary.

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

- 5 (1) a nonprofit organization;
- 6 (2) a veterans service organization;
- 7 (3) a public agency;
- 8 (4) a community-based organization; or
- 9 (5) an institution of higher education.

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

14 (d) SELECTION.—The Secretary shall select eligible
15 entities that submit applications under subsection (c) for
16 the award of grants under the pilot program using a com-
17 petitive process that takes into account the following:

- 18 (1) Capacity of the applicant entity to serve
19 veterans and family members of veterans.
- 20 (2) Demonstrated need of the population the
21 applicant entity would serve.
- 22 (3) Demonstrated need of the applicant entity
23 for assistance from the grant.
- 24 (4) Such other criteria as the Secretary con-
25 siders appropriate.

1 (e) DISTRIBUTION.—The Secretary shall ensure, to
2 the extent practicable, an equitable geographic distribu-
3 tion of grants awarded under this section.

4 (f) MINIMUM PROGRAM REQUIREMENTS.—Any grant
5 awarded under this section shall be used—

6 (1) to carry out a collaboration between one or
7 more eligible entities and one or more Vet Centers
8 or other facilities of the Department for five years;

9 (2) to increase participation in nutrition coun-
10 seling programs and provide educational materials
11 and counseling to veterans and family members of
12 veterans to address food insecurity and healthy diets
13 among those individuals;

14 (3) to increase access to and enrollment in Fed-
15 eral assistance programs, including the supplemental
16 nutrition assistance program under the Food and
17 Nutrition Act of 2008 (7 U.S.C. 2011 et seq.), the
18 special supplemental nutrition program for women,
19 infants, and children established by section 17 of the
20 Child Nutrition Act of 1966 (42 U.S.C. 1786), the
21 low-income home energy assistance program estab-
22 lished under the Low-Income Home Energy Assist-
23 ance Act of 1981 (42 U.S.C. 8621 et seq.), and any
24 other assistance program that the Secretary con-
25 siders advisable; and

1 (4) to fulfill such other criteria as the Secretary
2 considers appropriate to further the purpose of the
3 grant and serve veterans.

4 (g) PROVISION OF INFORMATION.—Each entity that
5 receives a grant under this section shall provide to the Sec-
6 retary, at least once each year during the duration of the
7 grant term, data on—

8 (1) the number of veterans and family members
9 of veterans screened for, and enrolled in, programs
10 described in paragraphs (2) and (3) of subsection
11 (f);

12 (2) other services provided by the entity to vet-
13 erans and family members of veterans using funds
14 from the grant; and

15 (3) such other data as the Secretary may re-
16 quire.

17 (h) REPORT.—Not later than 180 days after the date
18 of the enactment of this Act, the Secretary shall submit
19 to the appropriate committees of Congress a report on the
20 status of the implementation of this section.

21 (i) GOVERNMENT ACCOUNTABILITY OFFICE RE-
22 PORT.—

23 (1) IN GENERAL.—Not later than one year
24 after the date on which the pilot program termi-
25 nates, the Comptroller General of the United States

1 shall submit to Congress a report evaluating the ef-
2 fectiveness of the activities carried out under this
3 section in reducing food insecurity among veterans
4 and family members of veterans.

5 (2) ELEMENTS.—The report required by para-
6 graph (1) shall include the following:

7 (A) A summary of the activities carried out
8 under this section.

9 (B) An assessment of the effectiveness of
10 the grants awarded under this section, includ-
11 ing with respect to eligibility screening contacts,
12 application assistance consultations, and
13 changes in food insecurity among the popu-
14 lation served by the grant.

15 (C) Best practices regarding the use of
16 partnerships to improve the effectiveness of
17 public benefit programs to address food insecu-
18 rity among veterans and family members of vet-
19 erans.

20 (D) An assessment of the feasibility and
21 advisability of extending the term of the pilot
22 program.

23 (j) AUTHORIZATION OF APPROPRIATIONS.—

24 (1) IN GENERAL.—There is authorized to be
25 appropriated to carry out the pilot program estab-

1 lished under subsection (a) \$50,000,000 for each fis-
2 cal year in which the program is carried out, begin-
3 ning with the fiscal year in which the program is es-
4 tablished.

5 (2) ADMINISTRATIVE EXPENSES.—Of the
6 amounts authorized to be appropriated under para-
7 graph (1), not more than 5 percent may be used for
8 administrative expenses of the Department of Vet-
9 erans Affairs associated with administering grants
10 under this section.

11 (k) DEFINITIONS.—In this section:

12 (1) APPROPRIATE COMMITTEES OF CON-
13 GRESS.—The term “appropriate committees of Con-
14 gress” means—

15 (A) the Committee on Veterans’ Affairs
16 and the Committee on Appropriations of the
17 Senate; and

18 (B) the Committee on Veterans’ Affairs
19 and the Committee on Appropriations of the
20 House of Representatives.

21 (2) FACILITIES OF THE DEPARTMENT.—The
22 term “facilities of the Department” has the meaning
23 given that term in section 1701(3) of title 38,
24 United States Code.

1 (3) INSTITUTION OF HIGHER EDUCATION.—The
2 term “institution of higher education” has the
3 meaning given that term in section 101 of the High-
4 er Education Act of 1965 (20 U.S.C. 1001).

5 (4) PUBLIC AGENCY.—The term “public agen-
6 cy” means a department, agency, other unit, or in-
7 strumentality of Federal, State, Tribal, or local gov-
8 ernment.

9 (5) STATE.—The term “State” means each
10 State and Territory of the United States, the Dis-
11 trict of Columbia, and the Commonwealth of Puerto
12 Rico.

13 (6) VETERAN.—The term “veteran” means an
14 individual who served in the Armed Forces, includ-
15 ing an individual who served in a reserve component
16 of the Armed Forces, and who was discharged or re-
17 leased therefrom, regardless of the conditions of
18 such discharge or release.

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