

Health Subcommittee Reviews New and Existing Health Care Programs for Rural Veterans

Tuesday, March 24 2009

WASHINGTON, DC – On Thursday, March 19, 2009, the House Veterans’ Affairs Health Subcommittee, led by Chairman Michael Michaud (D-ME), held a hearing to examine ways to narrow the health disparities of veterans living in rural areas. The hearing specifically focused on funding and resource coordination within the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) at the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA).

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“Among VA health care users, nearly 2 million veterans, or 40 percent of all veterans, reside in rural areas,” said Chairman Michaud. “According to the VA Health Services Research and Development Office, rural veterans have worse physical and mental health related to quality of life scores compared to their urban counterparts. This is magnified by the shortage of health professionals that serve rural areas.”

In the VA budget for Fiscal Year 2009, Congress appropriated \$250 million to establish and implement a new rural health outreach and delivery initiative. VA has allocated \$45.75 million to support rural health initiatives thus far and the Office of Rural Health projected the next phase of funds distribution to occur by the third quarter of 2009.

VHA currently operates a number of efforts on rural health: Office of Rural Health, 750 Community-Based Outpatient Clinics, nearly 250 Vet Centers, 50 Mobile Vet Centers, 12 rural outreach clinics, Rural Health Resource Centers, a telehealth program focused on care coordination, and a Mobile Health Care Pilot Project, among other programs. Members of the Subcommittee pledged to continue oversight to ensure that new health outreach and delivery initiatives augment current programs and are compatible with VA’s long-term strategy on rural health care delivery.

The 110th Congress passed Public Law 110-387 which authorized a pilot program to provide peer outreach and support services through community mental health centers. The VA Office of Mental Health Services and the Office of Rural Health are in the process of implementing the pilot program.

“While a quarter of the U.S. population lives in rural areas, nearly half of military recruits and service members from Operations Iraqi and Enduring Freedom are from rural areas,” commented Bob Filner, Chairman of the House Committee on Veterans’ Affairs. “There are hundreds of thousands of new veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan. It is simply our duty as a Nation, when we put our men and women in harm’s way, to care for them when they return. We will continue to build on the great strides taken in the 110th Congress to improve access and provide care for veterans living in rural areas.”

Witness List:

Panel 1

Joy J. Ilem, Assistant National Legislative Director, Disabled American Veterans

Graham L. Adams, Ph.D., Chief Executive Officer, South Carolina Office of Rural Health

Panel 2

Adam Darkins, M.D., Chief Consultant, Office of Care Coordination, Veterans Health Administration, U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs

Kara Hawthorne, Director, Office of Rural Health, Veterans Health Administration, U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs

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Prepared testimony and a link to the webcast is available on the internet at this link:
<http://veterans.house.gov/hearings/hearing.aspx?newsid=360>.