

Counseling in Veterans Affairs Programs

05.17.06

(Updated May, 2006)

LEGISLATION

[S. 1182, the "Veterans Health Care Act of 2005"](#)

[Sponsor: Sen. Larry Craig (R-ID)]
(Passed U.S. Senate on 12/22/05)

[S. 1177, the "Veterans Mental Health Care Capacity Enhancement Act of 2005"](#)

[Sponsor: Sen. Daniel Akaka (D-HI)]
[Cosponsors](#) (as of 08/05): 4
(Passed U.S. Senate on 12/22/05 as provision in S. 1182)

[H.R. 5396, the "Veterans Mental Health Care Access Improvement Act"](#)

[Sponsor: Rep. Jerry Moran (R-KS)]
[Cosponsors](#) (as of 5/06): 1

LATEST INFORMATION

On May 16, Reps. Jerry Moran (R-KS) and Michael Michaud (D-ME) introduced H.R. 5396, the Veterans Mental Health Care Access Improvement Act. This bipartisan legislation will recognize licensed mental health counselors as providers in Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) programs.

The bill will allow mental health counselors to be eligible for better paying jobs with a greater potential for promotion at the VA. Reps. Moran and Michaud are both members of the House Veterans Affairs Committee and its Subcommittee on Health. The legislation was introduced following a meeting in Rep. Moran's Hays, Kansas, office with ACA and AMHCA member Carla Hattan, President of the Kansas Mental Health Counselors Association (KMHCA) and Bill Davis, a Kansas LPC.

Currently, the VA cannot hire mental health counselors at the pay grade that clinical social workers can be hired. Psychiatrists, psychologists and clinical social workers fill most supervisory positions at the Department's hospitals and outpatient clinics. The VA is the largest employer of clinical social workers in the United States and because social workers are in abundant supply, the VA on a full-time basis employs very few mental health counselors. In addition, social workers on staff develop many of the new positions in mental health services, and therefore the agency is most likely to hire social workers first. Psychiatrists, psychologists and clinical social workers are specifically named in VA statutes.

In December 2005, the U.S. Senate passed a bill (S. 1182) that, among other things, would allow mental health counselors to be appointed to positions in the VA. ACA and AMHCA are hopeful that the House will consider the Veterans Mental Health Care Access Improvement Act prior to the adjournment of the 109th Congress.

WHAT CAN YOU DO

Counselors are urged to contact their Representative to ask him/her to cosponsor the Veterans Mental Health Care Access Improvement Act. Senators should be thanked for passage of S. 1182 and S. 1177.

All Senators' and Representatives' D.C. offices can be reached by calling the Capitol Switchboard at 202-225-3121 (or 202-224-3121) and asking for a particular member's office. You can also find out who your Members of Congress are, or send an e-mail to them, by visiting the ACA internet legislative action center at <http://capwiz.com/counseling>. You'll find a sample message below, but remember, if at all possible, TELL YOUR LAWMAKER YOUR OWN PERSONAL STORY!

Letters should be addressed as follows:

for Senators:
The Honorable {full name}
U.S. Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

for Representatives:
The Honorable {full name}
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

SAMPLE MESSAGES

For REPRESENTATIVES: "As a constituent, I am calling to ask that the Representative cosponsor, H.R. 5396, the Veterans Mental Health Care Access Improvement Act. This legislation would add licensed mental health counselors to the list of providers who are eligible to be appointed to positions in the Veterans' Health Administration (VHA). This issue is especially important, given the excessive number of veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan with symptoms of mental illness.

Currently, LPCs cannot be hired at the skill level and pay grade that other master's level mental health professionals can be hired. However, LPCs are recognized by the Health Resources Services Administration (HRSA), the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, and are covered by TRICARE. In addition, LPCs have the same expertise and meet virtually identical educational and training requirements as current VHA employees.

Please cosponsor H.R. 5396, the Veterans Mental Health Care Access Improvement Act."

For SENATORS: "As a constituent, I am calling to thank the Senator for helping pass the Veterans Health Care Act of 2005 (S. 1182) which would add licensed professional counselors (LPCs) to the list of health providers that are eligible to be appointed to positions at the Veterans Health Administration.

Currently, LPCs cannot be hired at the skill level and pay grade that other master's level mental health professionals can be hired. However, LPCs are recognized by the Health Resources Services Administration (HRSA), the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, and are covered by TRICARE. In addition, LPCs have the same expertise and meet virtually identical educational and training requirements as current VHA employees.

Please tell the Senator thank you for helping pass the Veterans Health Care Act of 2005."

BACKGROUND

LPCs face significant employment obstacles within the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) and its hospitals, clinics, and programs across the country. While some ACA members have found positions within the agency, either on a contract or full-time basis, there continue to be barriers to independent practice, advancement, and hiring.

While licensed clinical social workers are able to practice independently and serve as clinical supervisors in the VA, counselors find themselves struggling to achieve similar recognition. The VA remains the largest employer of clinical social workers in the country. According to the VHA, most supervisory positions at Department hospitals and clinics are filled by psychiatrists, psychologists, and social workers. Many VHA positions in mental health services are developed by social workers on staff, and therefore the agency is most likely to hire social workers first. While VHA says there is no formal policy excluding LPCs from being hired, some ACA members have found that the VA does not recognize their licensure, and therefore refuses to hire them or relegates them to non-clinical positions. The lack of recognition of licensed professional counselors by the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) exacerbates this problem.

H.R. 5396 and Section 5 of S. 1182 include language to explicitly add both licensed professional counselors and licensed marriage and family therapists as recognized providers of mental health services within the VA health care system. Such formal recognition will foster appropriate recognition of licensed professional counselors within the VHA.

STATISTICS / FINDINGS

- Counselors could help address staffing shortages, especially in remote locations. There are over 80,000 licensed professional counselors in the U.S.
- The counselors who have managed to find work with the VA are prevented from being clinical supervisors or achieving promotion, meaning less experienced and less qualified providers are frequently hired and promoted ahead of highly skilled and experienced counselors.

- There is no justification for discriminating against counselors based on their education and training. Licensed professional counselors have education and experience on par with licensed clinical social workers: typically a master's or doctoral degree in counseling; completion of 3,000 hours of supervised clinical experience; passage of a national or state-recognized exam; and adherence to a strict code of ethics. These requirements are on par with those for currently-recognized VHA providers, such as clinical social workers.
- As many as one out of four veterans of Afghanistan and Iraq treated at Veterans Affairs hospitals in the past 16 months were diagnosed with mental disorders, a number that has been steadily rising, according to a report in the March, 2005 issue of New England Journal of Medicine.
- The Government Accountability Office's Special Committee on Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder recommended in 1985 that the Veterans' Affairs Department provide increased access to PTSD services for veterans. However, in February of 2005, twenty years later, the Special Committee found that the VA has not met the 1985 recommendations, and that PTSD services are not widely available in the VA's community-based clinics.
- When veterans with mental illness do not receive comprehensive rehabilitative care, they are more likely to become homeless. According to the National Coalition for Homeless Veterans, one in three adult homeless males is a veteran, and as many as three-quarters of homeless veterans have a mental illness, substance abuse problem, or both.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

-ACA Legislative Action Center: <http://capwiz.com/counseling>

If you are interested in assisting ACA in our efforts on this issue, please contact:

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American Counseling Association
Office of Public Policy and Legislation
(800) 347-6647 Ext. 242