

117TH CONGRESS  
1ST SESSION

# H. R. 3575

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

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IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

MAY 28, 2021

Mr. CICILLINE introduced the following bill; which was referred to the Committee on Veterans' Affairs

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## 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           (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.

○