



THE SECRETARY OF VETERANS AFFAIRS  
WASHINGTON

October 22, 2008

The Honorable Thomas H. Allen  
U.S. House of Representatives  
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Congressman Allen:

This is in response to your inquiry regarding the number of qualified Military Sexual Trauma (MST) counselors assigned to Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Vet Centers in the State of Maine.

VA's authority to provide MST counseling began in 1992 with the passage of Public Law 102-585, the Veterans Health Care Act of 1992. This authority is separate from that authorizing VA to provide readjustment counseling to combat veterans through the Vet Center program. The two authorities have distinct eligibilities and provide counseling for veterans exposed to different traumatic events.

Military sexual trauma is a serious and complex clinical issue that often requires a combination of medical and psychological services. Due to the frequency of co-morbid medical conditions associated with military sexual trauma, VA medical facilities have the lead role for MST staffing and service delivery. In 1993, VA allocated 39 positions to the Vet Center program dedicated to providing full-time MST counseling to veterans of any era. This policy decision was based on the Vet Center program's convenient community-based locations and client confidentiality, a prime setting for some sexually traumatized veterans.

To address the specialized training requirements for this service, the Vet Center program has developed a MST Staff Training and Experience Profile (STEP) as qualification criteria for the program's 39 dedicated positions. Also, the Vet Center program has augmented its MST counseling capacity by using the STEP criteria to qualify some of its in-house counselors to provide MST counseling. The STEP criteria used to qualify full-time dedicated MST counselors is the same used to qualify in-house Vet Center counselors. The in-house counselors, however, are not only dedicated to providing full-time MST counseling, but also provide readjustment counseling.

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Currently, MST counseling is available at four of the five Maine Vet Centers, through a combination of the one full-time dedicated staff, and four regular Vet Center professional counselors who have passed the STEP criteria. The Bangor Vet Center is the only Maine Vet Center without a qualified MST counselor. However, the Bangor Vet Center provides clinical assessment and referral to the local Community-Based Outpatient Clinic for veterans presenting with MST.

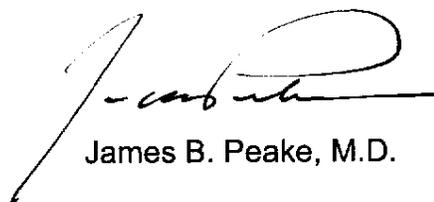
Based upon VetPop2007, VA's latest official estimate of veteran population by county, Maine has a total veteran population of 144,000 veterans. Our analysis of the workload data for the five Maine Vet Centers combined shows that 2,108 veterans were seen in Fiscal Year 2007, and accounted for 21,145 visits. The five MST qualified counselors combined saw 75 MST veterans for 1,023 visits. The one full-time dedicated MST counselor saw 49 of 75 MST veterans during 806 visits. She also saw 18 non-MST combat veterans for 18 visits for a total of 824 visits for the year.

I have carefully considered your request and have asked that resources be provided to support another full-time MST counselor to be assigned to the Bangor Vet Center. We anticipate filling this position by the end of the third quarter of this fiscal year.

Additionally, VA has authorized an outreach vehicle to be assigned to the Vet Center in Caribou to conduct outreach services to the veterans in rural areas. The Caribou Vet Center has also been augmented by one counseling position. One of the two counselors at this Vet Center is STEP qualified to provide MST counseling, and provided MST services to 10 veterans in FY 2007. As this process evolves, we will be monitoring the need for MST counseling in the rural areas covered by the outreach vehicle and take appropriate action.

VA looks forward to working with you to identify those veterans in need of counseling for military-related sexual trauma. I hope this information is helpful.

Sincerely yours,



James B. Peake, M.D.