

History of Vet Centers



Founding and Establishment

1979: Vet Centers were established by Congress, and signed into law, on June 13, 1979 out of the recognition that a significant number of Vietnam combat and era Veterans were not accessing VA services at the same levels as Korean and World War II Veterans.

Public Law 96-22 amended Title 38 USC to establish authority for VA to provide readjustment counseling as a new category of service. The role of this new service was to assist Vietnam Veterans and their families in making the transition from traumatic war-time experiences to civilian life within their home communities.

The Congressional intent regarding the nature of readjustment counseling included the following basic features:

- Readjustment counseling is a non-medical/non-diagnosis counseling service provided through community-based Vet Centers located outside the larger VA medical system.
- Vet Centers will decrease as many barriers to care such as building trust by hiring fellow combat Veterans.
- Counseling, outreach and referral is provided in a comfortable, confidential and professional atmosphere that engages the Veteran client as a partner in the development of the counseling plan.

In response to the new law, VA implemented “Operation Outreach” to administer 87 temporary, community-based Vet Centers.

Establishing Permanency

1981: Due to high utilization of the Vet Centers by Vietnam Veterans, Congress passed legislation, extending the life of the program through September 1984.

1983: The program’s temporary, two-year status was eliminated, and readjustment counseling was established as a life-time entitlement for eligible Veterans.

Expanding Vet Centers, Services and Eligibility

1991: In the wake of Operation Desert Storm and Operation Desert Shield, Congress passed legislation in April 1991 extending Vet Center readjustment counseling eligibility to all post-Vietnam Veterans who served in a combat theater of operations.

1992: Vet Centers received authorization to provide counseling to any Veteran reporting sexual assault and/or harassment while serving on active military duty during any period or in any area of service.

1996: Congress expanded eligibility for Vet Center readjustment counseling services to any Veteran who served in the military in a theater of combat operations during any period of war, such as World War II and Korea, or in any other area during a period in which hostilities occurred.

2003: VA Secretary authorized Vet Centers to provide bereavement counseling services to surviving parents, spouses, children and siblings of service members who have died while on active duty, to include federally activated Reserve and National Guard personnel.

2004: Outreach specialist positions were created by hiring combat Veterans to create face to face connections with other Veterans to improve awareness and access to care. By the end of 2004, more than 900 employees staffed 206 Vet Centers.

2008: To ensure access to readjustment counseling for new generations of combat Veterans returning from active service in Iraq and Afghanistan, the Secretary of Veterans Affairs authorized 90 new Vet Centers 50 Mobile Vet Centers (MVCs).

2009: The first Mobile Vet Center hit the road, expanding services into other, and often more remote, communities.

2010: Eligibility expanded to include active duty service members who met other eligibility criteria.

2011: A 24/7 Vet Center Call Center was operational and ready to accept calls, assisting Veterans, family members and stakeholders.

2013: The National Defense Authorization Act extended eligibility to those who provided direct emergent medical care or mortuary services while serving on active duty or served as a member of an unmanned aerial vehicle crew that provided direct support to operations in a combat zone or area of hostility. The law also mandated the organizational realignment of the Readjustment Counseling Service (RCS) as a separate and distinct organization within the Veterans Health Administration (VHA), with separate funding in the annual President's Budget submission, and under the direct line authority to the Under Secretary for Health.

2014: The Veterans Access, Choice, & Accountability Act amended authority to provide counseling services to active duty personnel who experience sexual assault/harassment while in the military.

Today: Confidential readjustment counseling services are provided at 300 Vet Centers, 80 mobile Vet Centers, numerous outstations and community access points as well as 24/7 through the Vet Center Call Center. More than 2,000 staff are ready to assist eligible Veterans, active duty service members and their families with a wide range of services, ranging from socioeconomic concerns to dealing with the trauma associated with war, sexual assault and psychological injury.