

Testimony of Congressman Peter Welch

House Armed Services Committee

2012 Legislative Priorities

Chairman McKeon and Ranking Member Smith, thank you for the opportunity to testify before the committee today.

My request is simple. I am asking the Armed Services Committee to take a successful Vermont program and implement it nationwide. The Vermont National Guard Outreach Program was started in 2007 through congressionally directed spending and continued through 2010. The program funds the training of veterans to serve as outreach specialists to provide assistance to Vermont National Guard members and their families.

These outreach specialists travel door-to-door to provide information on services to Guard members and their families pre, during and post deployment. These services include general health problems; mental health, marriage and financial counseling; services for children; and substance abuse awareness and treatment programs. These issues are critical to readjustment and reintegration. The program works in close consultation with the Department of Veterans Affairs in Vermont, the Vermont National Guard's Family Readiness Program and the Yellow Ribbon Reintegration Program to leverage funding and expertise.

From all accounts, this program has been remarkably successful. One reason for the program's success is that Guard members and families do not have to seek out help – help is offered to them. This help is also offered by trained veterans, individuals who can relate to the lives of our Green Mountain Boys and know their struggles. The work of these Outreach Specialists has helped many Vermont families.

While I am most intimately familiar with my state's programs, Vermont is not alone in this work. Similar Outreach programs have also been funded in seven other states: New Hampshire, New Jersey, North Carolina, Oregon, Colorado, Washington and Minnesota. All of these programs are set to expire this summer. Vermont has been the first to experience the expiration of these funds and has already felt the effects.

While the National Guard Bureau has found limited stop-gap funding for Vermont, they have had to drastically reduce the number of Outreach Specialists from 19 to six. This could not come at a worse time for Vermont as the largest deployment in our state's history has recently returned. While the Vermont Outreach Specialists currently have over 500 active cases, nearly 1000 Guard members' households are yet to be served.

The National Guard Bureau has expressed support of this program and has acknowledged the importance to Vermont and other states with similar programs. To that end, earlier this spring I led a Dear Colleague letter which was signed by 42 other bipartisan members of the House of Representatives and the Senate to the Secretary of the Army and Chief of Staff of the Guard Bureau urging them to fund this program through the end of the current fiscal year and to develop a proposal to continue this program in FY2012 and expand it to all 54 states and territories. According to the National Guard Bureau, the cost of expanding this program to all 54 states and territories is estimated at \$72.4 million.

I believe the experience in Vermont can be a lesson for the rest of the country and that many other National Guard families can benefit from these support services. I therefore ask you to review Vermont's program along with the seven other states' programs to create a national outreach program for Guard members and their families. I plan to introduce legislation to make this program national and ask you to include this language in the Fiscal Year 2012 National Defense Authorization Act.

Thank you.