

Stockton Record

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*MODESTO* - A good number of the 80,000 veterans living in the northern San Joaquin Valley are completely unaware of the mental health services available to them through the Department of Veterans Affairs.

And of those who do avail themselves, many have issues with how they learned about those services or access to getting the appropriate help they need. However, those who have taken that first step through the door of a Vet Center expressed nothing short of high praise and appreciation for the life-altering services provided.

That's the primary message from testimony taken Thursday at a field hearing of the House Committee on Veterans Affairs Subcommittee on Health conducted at the American Legion Hall in Modesto. The hearing was conducted by local Reps. Jerry McNerney, D-Pleasanton - representing most of San Joaquin County - and Jeff Denham, R-Atwater, representing portions of Stanislaus and Merced counties.

"We need better outreach for our veterans. We know a lot of them are going to have problems. I sponsored an omnibus health bill that requires VA to go out, because our local veterans don't feel the outreach is enough. I want to make sure this happens," McNerney said in response to a question about why the hearing was being held in the northern San Joaquin Valley. Denham agreed.

"This is where we're feeling it the most - in the rural areas I think is where the veterans are hit the hardest. A lot of this is about awareness," Denham said.

McNerney said he was glad to see the congressional committee hearing directly from veterans living in the Valley, where Vet Centers are few and far between. Modesto's busy Vet Center, at

1219 N. Carpenter Road, Suite 12, opened just four years ago and is the only one between Fresno and Concord.

It offers an informal setting providing readjustment counseling services to veterans and their families - everything from individual and group counseling to family and marriage counseling; bereavement counseling for families who experience an active-duty death; military sexual trauma counseling and referral; couples communication skills; anger and stress management; sleep improvement; transition skills for civilian life; substance abuse assessment; employment assessment and referral; and screening for medical issues such as mild traumatic brain injury and depression.

"Their workload continues to increase and will likely do so as returning veterans deal with mild readjustment issues to serious mental health challenges," McNerney said, expressing hope that Congress can help the VA maintain and improve Vet Center services through appropriate facilities and staffing.

"We must all work together," he told more than 100 people attending the hearing, including veterans of the nation's numerous wars, county veterans service officers, Vet Center staff and VA employees.

Testifying before the committee, Modesto resident Ryan Lundeby, a young veteran of the Army Airborne Rangers who served five deployments in Iraq and Afghanistan, explained how a chance encounter with a Vet Center outreach specialist completely changed his life.

"When I got out of the Army, I did not even know that there was a place for combat vets like the Vet Center. After hanging out with the guys at the Vet Center, I learned what they were about. Before, little problems with my wife turned into big fights. With counseling, I was able to de-escalate situations," Lundeby said.

"Without the Vet Center, I don't think I'd be as happily married to my best friend," he said, explaining how counseling taught him how to communicate his feelings. Lundeby remains discouraged, however, by the high rates of divorce and suicide among veterans, because many either don't know help is available or refuse help.

"Service members are afraid of the repercussions from their chain of command. (But) the Vet Centers can help because they work in strict confidentiality," Lundeby said.

"Also, most of the staff at the Vet Centers are combat vets. It is much easier for a service member to talk to someone with a similar background who can relate to what the service member has been through and is experiencing in their life."

Former Stockton resident Chris Lambert, a Marine veteran of the violent Tet Offensive during the Vietnam War who earned three Purple Hearts for his combat injuries, provided emotional testimony on the critical role Vet Centers play outside the confines of a VA hospital.

"Just the smell of a hospital is a trigger. Mixing traumatic mental health services in a hospital setting is a mistake," he said.

Everyone could agree that as the region's veteran population grows along with greater recognition of post-traumatic stress disorder and other mental health issues, more Vet Centers and increased staffing will be needed to meet the demand. And getting the word out to veterans about those services is of primary importance.