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Written Testimony for the Comm. on Veterans’ Affairs, Conn. Gen. Assembly, on SB-284

Madam Chair, Mr. Chairman, Mr. Chairman, and Members of the Committee on Veterans’ Affairs. My name is Amy Radivoy, and I am a Licensed Mental Health Counselor. I have worked for the Federal Government for 19 years—4 for the Department of Defense and 15 for the New Haven Veterans Center. My role has been that of a Counselor and for the past 10 years the Director of the Center. I am here today in support of RSB-284, an Act Expanding Veterans Benefits Eligibility for Certain Veterans.

Vet Centers are community-based counseling centers operated by Readjustment Counseling Service, a mental health division of the Department of Veterans Affairs. Congress established the Vet Centers in 1979. The authorizing legislation arose from a recognition of the special readjustment needs of veterans who served during the Vietnam War. The New Haven Vet Center was one of the 1st group of Vet Centers opened. Today there are 300 Vet Centers in the U.S., Puerto Rico, US Virgin Islands and Guam.

Further legislation from 1991 to the present opened the services to Veterans who served in all areas of conflict, including in cases of Military Sexual Trauma and for veterans suffering from mental illnesses such as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and Traumatic Brain Injuries. The goal of the Vet Center program is to provide a broad range of counseling, outreach, and referral services to eligible veterans and their families in order to help them make a satisfying readjustment to civilian life. The Vet Center finds that a strong integral part of our daily operation is referring Veterans to other ancillary programs and an array of benefits for the Veterans and their families. The New Haven Vet Center keeps a separate outreach room with
information and brochures on these programs and benefits readily accessible to any Veteran who calls or walks in.

Our center is staffed by fully licensed mental health professionals equipped to serve veterans suffering from PTSD or TBI, or with experiences of MST. As such, we are eager to play a central role in the administration of this proposal. We routinely make diagnoses of these qualifying conditions, and will be able to ensure that veterans with OTH discharges can be screened for them at our center. For veterans who do in fact have one of the conditions, we’ll be able to fill out the corresponding form for them to submit to the appropriate agency.

I’m so supportive of this proposal because I’ve witnessed firsthand the struggles of veterans with suffering from mental illnesses. One of my first cases when I first relocated to the State of CT and began working at The New Haven Vet Center was a Vietnam Army Combat Infantryman in the Mekong Delta. He was known as Jack. He was awarded the Bronze Star with Valor for an act of heroism with his unit. This Veteran was about 55 years old at the time and proved over and over to be my most challenging case and then my most successful case. He battled mental illness, substance abuse, homelessness, unemployment, interpersonal/social difficulties and an array of other problems for 4 decades. He could not walk into our center without exploding in anger. Soon after meeting this Hero, I saw how his symptoms were in many ways worse and more complicated than other Vietnam Veterans who were Combat Infantrymen in Vietnam. Feeling more detached and like a failure to his country, this patriotic man continually struggled severely. Because of his Other-than-Honorable Discharge, he was unable to access the resources necessary to cope. If he would have been afforded state benefits, I can point to numerous times in 4 decades that he may have had better assistance educationally, occupationally, financially and directly affecting his mental health and esteem.
The staff at the New Haven Vet Center and Vet Centers nationwide have seen numerous cases like Jack’s. Veterans from all eras, WW II, Korea, Gulf War, Iraq, Afghanistan and numerous conflicts in between. Each case is different. Each case is individualized. Thanks to Yale Law School, CT Veterans Legal Council and other passionate fighters, many lives are being changed and impacted. However, it is a major battle and the Other than Honorable Discharge Veterans in the majority of cases I have personally seen had something traumatic that impacted that final discharge. Unfortunately, it often is displayed in behavioral, occupational, interpersonal difficulties which usually are traceable back to a traumatic event during service and the military not providing appropriate or sufficient exploration or treatment of the situation and military member. This proposal can make all the difference in the lives of these veterans.

Two signs are at probably every Vet Center Nationwide. They Read “Welcome Home” and “Through These Doors Walk America’s Finest.” Myself and my staff make our best effort to live that motto every day. The internal pain of a Veteran with an Other Than Honorable Discharge is not something most of us have ever experienced. The shame that they feel further complicates their everyday survival. Connecticut spearheaded many changes for veterans already, and it would only be compelling and beneficial for the State of CT to take the lead in awarding much needed benefits to Other than Honorable Veterans.