

WALTER B. JONES  
3D DISTRICT, NORTH CAROLINA

ROOM 2333  
RAYBURN HOUSE OFFICE BUILDING  
WASHINGTON, DC 20515  
TELEPHONE: (202) 225-3415

COMMITTEES:  
COMMITTEE ON ARMED SERVICES  
COMMITTEE ON FINANCIAL SERVICES

DISTRICT OFFICE:  
1105-C CORPORATE DRIVE  
GREENVILLE, NC 27858  
(252) 931-1003  
(800) 351-1697

**Congress of the United States**  
**House of Representatives**  
Washington, DC 20515-3303

August 24, 2012

The Honorable Eric Shinseki  
Secretary  
Department of Veterans Affairs  
810 Vermont Avenue NW  
Washington, DC 20420

Dear Secretary Shinseki:

I write to you today to express my concern over the Department of Veterans Affairs inaction on an issue that prevents it from obtaining adequate staff to fill vacant mental health positions which undermine the VA health system and as a result, prevents our nation's veterans from receiving adequate mental health treatment.

In 2006, Congress passed, and the President signed, P.L. 109-461, which explicitly added mental health counselors to the VA's clinician pool. Four years later, in September 2010, your agency adopted an occupational standard for licensed professional mental health counselors (LPMHCs). Nationwide there are more than 120,000 licensed professional counselors--including at least 4,500 in the state of North Carolina--licensed for independent practice in diagnosing and treating mental and emotional disorders.

Unfortunately, only a relative handful of LPMHC positions have been added at VA facilities, and instead VA facilities are almost exclusively hiring clinical social workers for outpatient mental health service provider positions. I am fearful it is taking longer than necessary to build up the VA's pool of mental health service providers, and equally importantly, that the VA is not drawing upon the most highly qualified providers to serve our veterans.

Quite simply, these means that the VA is failing to take advantage of licensed professional mental health counselors while at the same time a record number of veterans are seeking mental health care from the VA.

I would respectfully ask that you take action and that the VA take strong, concrete steps to increase the number of licensed professional mental health counselors being hired by VA facilities in North Carolina and across the country. I believe that this could be established by taking the following specific actions:

- 1) Direct the VA's Office of Academic Affiliations to include counselors in its paid trainee program. Currently, the office only offers positions in this program to psychologists, psychiatrists and social workers, but counselors are shut out. These positions are a well-

trod pathway to careers within the VA, and counselors are being unfairly and arbitrarily discriminated against by being excluded from the program.

- 2) Begin to work with groups like the American Counseling Association and other counseling groups to help fill the 3,100 vacancies in the VA. These trade associations have national networks that can help find applicants for these positions.
- 3) Issue a public notice to the entire VA healthcare system reminding them that they are empowered to hire counselors, and asking them not to shut-out an entire profession that can provide desperately needed help to our veterans.
- 4) Ask the VA to adopt "grandfathering" provisions to expand eligibility for LPMHC positions. It is my understanding that many--and in some states, most--licensed professional counselors have graduate degrees in counseling that, while of high quality and rigor, are not accredited by the Council on Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP). Indeed, many licensed professional counselors obtained their graduate degrees before CACREP existed. Fully-licensed counselors with many years of experience, who have completed continuing education or certification on working with veterans or military personnel and their families, especially those who are veterans themselves, should be considered for incorporation into the VA's workforce, not ruled ineligible from the outset.

Mr. Secretary, I know that you are committed to ensuring that every single veteran gets the mental healthcare that they need and deserve. I also believe that you are not one to let a valuable resource go to waste, but by not utilizing counselors in the VA, that is exactly what the VA is doing.

We have a desperate need for mental health clinicians. These counselors can help meet that need. We should make sure their talents do not go to waste.

Thank you for your time and consideration on this matter. I look forward to your response.

Sincerely,



Walter B. Jones  
Member of Congress

