



FOUNTAIN BROTHERS POST 1619

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Please Support the Vietnam Era Veterans Hepatitis C Testing Enhancement Act (H.R. 5922)

The Issue

The Veterans Administration (VA) is working to test and treat veterans for hepatitis C (HCV), and Congress has dedicated specific resources to these activities. However, VA enrollment is approximately 20 to 22% of all veterans, of which half use VA Health Care. Effectively, the VA may have tested 8 to 9% of the 8.5 million Vietnam and Vietnam Era Veterans who are considered at high-risk for infection, leaving 7.5 million unaware of their status.

HCV was a major issue in the late 60s and early 70s, particularly for “baby boomers” and those who served during the Vietnam Era. At this time, service members were unknowingly being exposed to HCV, including through mandatory jet gun-based group inoculations (which are now banned by the DOD and the World Health Organization). In fact, current medical literature shows that Vietnam Era Veterans are at up to 10 times higher risk than the general population for having HCV, but the actual prevalence rate is unknown.

The “Post 1619” Model

Our small Legion Post has led the country with 4 clinics in the last 12 months, which have tested over 1,200 veterans, including hard to reach veterans (outside the VA system), using point-of-care rapid protocol testing. During this time period, the entire VA has tested only 2,450 veterans using outreach testing, even though mandated by Congress to prioritize this and *break down all barriers to testing all veterans*. We have been successful in getting Vietnam Era Veterans into the testing-and-treatment paradigm by working with the VA and supporting their efforts.

About the Vietnam Era Veterans Hepatitis C Testing Enhancement Act

- Establishes a one-year pilot program for five veterans integrated service networks (two rural and three urban) to implement the collaborative outreach model (which prioritizes coordination with veterans service organizations to reach veterans outside of the VA system) to test at least 350,000 and includes reporting requirements to gauge the success of the effort and the feasibility of broader/nationwide adoption.
- The model features rapid point-of-care outreach testing with the VA providing appropriate support and coordination.
- In order to reach all high-risk veterans, the pilot program advances a scientific study to secure prevalence data for the Vietnam Era HCV prevalence rate, which opens testing to any honorably discharged Vietnam or Vietnam Era service member who served between February 28, 1961, and May 7, 1975 regardless of current affiliation with the VA.
- Seeks to Maintain budget neutrality by utilizing previously allocated (and currently under-utilized) resources provided by Congress to the VA for HCV activities.

The VA currently has a mandate to test and treat affected military personnel within the VA system. We encourage Congress to bolster this mandate by adding an outreach component to ensure that VA is also working with VSOs to connect with at-risk veterans who are not currently engaged with the VA system (and may not have private insurance or be utilizing alternative forms of healthcare access). Moreover, all Vietnam Era Veterans should have the right to know their HCV status through convenient outreach and available rapid testing.