

Legislators Call on VA to Use NJ Vet2Vet as National Model

Piscataway, NJ – U.S. Sen. Frank R. Lautenberg (D-NJ) and Rep. Rush Holt (D-NJ-12) today visited the Vet2Vet Support Center at the University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey (UMDNJ) to discuss their legislation to expand mental health support services to reserve members who were deployed after 2001 and who are currently slipping through the cracks without access to adequate care. Lautenberg and Holt also took the opportunity to applaud UMDNJ for expanding its services to more New Jersey soldiers, specifically those enlisted in the Individual Ready Reserve (IRR), and for serving as a model for the Veterans Affairs Administration to follow at a national level.

“The NJ Vet2Vet program is a proven success that has kept thousands of New Jersey military members, veterans and their loved ones from suffering in silence” said Lautenberg, an Army veteran. “I am working with Congressman Holt in Washington to advance the Coleman Bean Act and help expand mental health support services to more soldiers and their families. NJ Vet2Vet works here in New Jersey and I will continue my call for the VA to expand it at a national level.”

“Our commitment to confronting the national suicide epidemic among our veterans must be comprehensive and it must be unwavering. No family should experience what the Bean family experienced,” Holt said. “To close a critical gap in suicide prevention, I worked to pass legislation in the House, which Senator Lautenberg introduced in the Senate, named in Coleman Bean’s memory. We also must increase funding for direct advertising and social media outreach to reach veterans where they are. And we must support effective programs like UMDNJ’s NJ Vet2Vet peer-to-peer counseling and suicide prevention program, which is going to begin a direct outreach program to New Jersey-based reservists and those in the inactive National Guard.”

“One of UMDNJ’s true successes as an academic health center in improving a specific health outcome for New Jersey is our NJ Vet2Vet program,” stated Dr. William Owen, President of UMDNJ. “Our soldiers, veterans, and their families know that they can pick up the phone any time of day or night and know that someone who understands, someone who knows that the searing pain of warfare does not get easily left behind thousands of miles away, is listening. We hope the enhancements to NJ Vet2Vet will continue increasing access to these services for anyone who needs them.”

Lautenberg and Holt introduced legislation named after Sergeant Coleman Bean, a New Jersey

reservist who committed suicide in 2008 after returning home from his second tour in Iraq. The legislation would take steps to expand and improve services including requiring mental health screenings via phone at least once every 90 days for all members of the Individual Ready Reserves (IRR). The legislation, which is pending in the Senate was approved in the House of Representatives in May as part of the fiscal year 2011 Defense Authorization Act.

In addition, the U.S. House of Representatives recently approved an amendment written by Rep. Holt to allocate \$20 million into the FY2011 Department of Veterans Affairs budget for direct advertising and the use of online social media for suicide prevention outreach. The legislation is pending in the Senate.

Vet2Vet is a comprehensive, in-person support program for soldiers going into combat, veterans and their families. The program provides training for service members before they deploy and after they return. NJ Vet2Vet also provides a 24-hour-a-day, peer-operated hotline that provides comprehensive support services. While the National Guard suicide rate is rising nationally, there has not been a single suicide in the New Jersey National Guard since NJ Vet2Vet started 5 years ago.

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