



**American
Red Cross**

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**Before the Committee on Veterans Affairs
United States Senate**

***Call to Action: VA Outreach and Community Partnerships
April 24, 2013***

Chairman Sanders, Ranking Member Burr, and distinguished Members of the Veterans Affairs Committee. I would like to commend the committee for holding this hearing on Veterans Affairs Outreach and Community Partnerships and I appreciate the opportunity to submit this written testimony on behalf of the American Red Cross.

The American Red Cross shelters, feeds and provides emotional support to victims of disasters; supplies about 40 percent of the nation's blood; teaches skills that save lives; provides international humanitarian aid; and relevant to this testimony, supports military members and their families.

The American Red Cross has supported service members, veterans and their families for more than a century. Our military and veteran services are our oldest, most foundational and cherished mission passed down through generations. As a veteran myself, I am honored to support this mission today.

General Overview of Support for our Veterans

The Red Cross began providing service to veterans in 1917, when we opened the Institute for Crippled and Disabled Men in New York City. The Institute specialized in occupational training for those returning from World War I with missing limbs. As the war ended, more programs were introduced to address the large number of maimed and disabled Veterans returning to civilian life. To aid their needs, innovative occupational therapy and recreational programs were implemented in Veterans Hospitals.

When the United States Veterans Bureau was established by Congress in August 1921 as the official agency responsible for the care of veterans, Red Cross support of ill and injured veterans continued through the Hospital and Recreation Corps, the Junior Red Cross, and what later became known as the Gray Lady Service of uniformed volunteer nurses.

Today, our work with veterans continues and includes emergency services such as

emergency communications and financial assistance: support for the wounded, ill and injured in VA medical facilities and local communities; reintegration and resiliency support; and providing opportunities for volunteerism. Our network is far-reaching and available around the clock.

Red Cross offices across the country and around the world participate in education and outreach events throughout the cycle of military service. Beginning with new recruits at Military Entrance Processing Stations, pre-deployment briefings, welcome home events, family days, and others, we get the word out on how to reach the Red Cross and what types of support we can provide. We are there for community based outreach events in partnership with Veteran Service Organizations such as the American Legion, Veterans of Foreign Wars, Disabled American Veterans, and their Auxiliaries; fraternal and service organizations such as the Elks, Lions, and Rotary; faith-based organizations and others.

The Red Cross is able to provide these important services through employees and volunteers who work alongside the military community across the country and around the world. This includes a network of 1,200 Red Cross offices both on installations and in communities across the country. Currently, we also have staff and volunteers serving with deployed service members in Afghanistan, Djibouti, and Kuwait.

A cornerstone of Red Cross support to the United States Armed Forces is our emergency communications services. When a military family experiences a crisis, the American Red Cross is there to help. Wherever their military service takes them, service members can rest assured that the Red Cross will deliver notification of an emergency such as the death or serious illness of an immediate family member, as well as the good news of the birth of a service member's child or grandchild. Twenty-four hours a day, 365 days a year, the Red Cross relays urgent messages containing accurate, factual, complete and verified descriptions of the emergency to service members stationed anywhere in the world, including on ships at sea and at embassies and remote locations. During fiscal year 2012, the Red Cross provided over 320,000 emergency communication services to 131,000 military members and their families, including nearly \$7 million in financial assistance to more than 6,000 families on behalf of the military aid societies.

In addition to our emergency communications services and support to service members on installations, the Red Cross has two resiliency courses to assist service members, veterans and their families with the challenges of deployment. Both of these psycho-educational courses are led by independently licensed mental health volunteers and are available to anyone impacted by a military deployment -- particularly those who directly support the service member, such as spouses, parents, siblings and significant others, and includes all branches of the armed forces. The courses are offered through Red Cross offices in the United States, its territories and through installations in the European region.

Coping with Deployments: Psychological First Aid for Military Families was launched in October 2008 to assist military family members before and during a deployment cycle. The skill building course teaches family members how to strengthen their ability to successfully respond to challenges that they may encounter when a loved one is away.

The course also explains how to support others experiencing stressful feelings or events. Since 2008, approximately 4,500 people have participated in the instructor-led course.

In September 2011, the Red Cross launched Reconnection Workshops, a series of small-group, interactive courses for military families that focus on reintegration following deployment. The course was developed with the assistance of the Walmart Foundation and consists of five different topics that service members and their families identified as critical to the reintegration period: managing anger, communication techniques, identifying depression, understanding and supporting the needs of children, and recognizing issues around stress and traumatic brain injury. The Red Cross has reached nearly 4,000 people with this course.

In short, we work at the community level to ensure the veteran and his or her family knows what resources are available to them in their hometown, that our efforts reflect their needs, and the community is working together to serve them.

Community Based Partnerships and the VA

The Red Cross does much of our work through partnerships. The strong relationships we have with the Department of Defense, the Department of Veterans Affairs and the many other local and national non-profits who serve the military community are invaluable to our mission. An important facet is ensuring that what the Red Cross provides is both relevant to those we serve, and also complementary to the government and other community resources available. I cannot over-emphasize that no one organization can provide everything that a veteran and his or her family may need. Each organization brings something unique to the table, and we must continue to work closely together to ensure the assistance is well placed and reaches those who need it.

The Red Cross works closely with the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). The Red Cross is one of six charter members when Veterans Affairs Volunteer Services (VAVS) was formed in 1946, and proudly stands as a leader among more than 7,400 local and national organizations. We are classified as a Service Member (voting) Organization, which requires a minimum of participation on 30 VAVS advisory committees. Additionally, we hold a seat on the VAVS Executive Committee (EC). Red Cross Chapters nationwide have representatives on more than 90 VAVS Advisory Committees and provide services in 139 VA Medical facilities.

In addition, more than 900 Red Cross volunteers work an average of 80,000 hours in VA facilities annually and are active in every aspect of the VA Voluntary Service program. Red Cross volunteers contribute in a number of ways, including Red Cross College Clubs creating mobile gardens for Community Living Centers; youth interviewing patients for the Library of Congress Veterans History Project; Veterans helping Veterans get to medical appointments through the Volunteer Transportation Program; and licensed medical professionals giving their time to those who served our country.

In March 2012, Red Cross volunteer, Joy Neulieb, from Battle Creek, Michigan, received the VA Volunteer Services Committee Female Volunteer of the Year Award for her

services in the Community Living Center, In Patient Mental Health and Therapeutic Recreation Section of the Battle Creek Michigan VA Medical Center. Ms. Neulieb is a shining example of Red Cross in action.

Our work with the VA extends beyond serving those veterans in a VA hospital facility. The VA Crisis Line connects veterans with qualified VA responders through a confidential hotline. Through our partnership with the VA, we recognized that collaboration between our Emergency Communications Center and the VA Crisis Line could literally help save lives. More than once a day (478 times last year), the Red Cross Emergency Communications Center receives calls from family members seeking our intervention when a service member or veteran has indicated they might harm themselves. Now, when the VA Crisis Line receives a call concerning someone on active duty and they cannot quickly locate the individual, the Red Cross is immediately brought in to assist by working with the military. Additionally, we work closely with the VA Crisis Line in situations where the Red Cross is contacted concerning a veteran to provide immediate and compassionate assistance.

Through a network of Veteran Service Officers, the Red Cross assists veterans, widows, widowers and dependents with the preparation and submission of claims and at the Board of Veterans' Appeals office in Washington, DC.

The Red Cross also acknowledges the tremendous resource our veterans are to the work force. The American Red Cross Military Outreach Program is designed to build a robust pipeline of talent from the veteran and military spouse communities and hire qualified candidates to support the mission of the organization. In 2012, the Red Cross set an aggressive goal to hire 1,000 veterans by the end of 2014. This commitment includes not only placing veterans in appropriate positions, but also developing training and transition programs for service members and spouses.

Partnerships and Pilot Programs

Red Cross collaboration to support veterans also extends beyond those ties we have with the VA. Several years ago, a coalition of more than 50 non-profit and government leaders got together to discuss how we could better work together and really make a difference for the military and veteran communities. One effort that developed from the meeting was rooted in what so many of us have seen at the local level – that is, building powerful community coalitions to deliver tremendous benefits. This initiative is now called “the Community Blueprint Network.” The Community Blueprint is a set of tools and practices that provide a framework for communities to produce positive, measureable outcomes for veterans, military members and their families. It is administered by our partner, the Points of Light Institute, under the leadership of my colleague, Mike Monroe.

The Red Cross is sponsoring one of the Community Blueprint pilot sites in South Florida. The coalition is focusing on reintegration for veterans by helping bridge the gaps that can sometimes exist between leaving the military and returning to the community. The program focuses on the individual veteran by assessing their needs and developing an individual plan which may include peer support, assistance for health, education, employment, and other issues. The Red Cross does not provide all

these things by itself, but works with our partners to ensure the veteran gets what he or she needs. For example, all veterans who participate in the program are assisted with registration for VA benefits, and those requiring assistance beyond those services offered by the VA are connected with one of our partners.

The Metropolitan Atlanta Chapter of the American Red Cross is also supporting a Community Blueprint initiative with the charge of becoming the conduit for veterans to gain access to the full range of support available to them. This coalition consists of a group of over 40 agencies including national entities such as Goodwill Industries, the VA Regional Office, United Way 211, as well as local organizations like Hope Atlanta and Warriors 2 Citizens.

Several Red Cross chapters have formed strong state and local partnerships to provide support to the veteran community. Through a state AmeriCorps program, the American Red Cross Southern Arizona Region engages AmeriCorps members to reach the military community and provide Red Cross services including recruiting other volunteers, sharing the overall Red Cross message, helping with development/fundraising, volunteering at the VA hospital, and acting as a force multiplier on military installations.

The Southern Arizona Region, with support from a Supportive Services to Veterans and Families grant from the Department of Veterans Affairs, initiated a program to help prevent and address veteran homelessness. The program is staffed by individuals specializing in intake, housing, finance, employment outreach and other areas to provide a temporary bridge of support leading to self-sufficiency through employment or receipt of VA and/or other entitlements they may be due. This support may come in the way of financial assistance with rent, utilities, moving related and other expenses, and case management services to assist with receiving VA and other local-community based support.

Conclusion

Thank you again for the opportunity to submit this testimony. These are just a few examples of how the Red Cross has been called to action in partnership with community-based organizations as well as with the VA and other government agencies. We are pleased to work with our partners in the VA as well as our partners in the non-profit, government and private sectors and are working hard to improve efficiencies and to increase individual and community awareness.

Finally, support for our veterans is and will remain steadfast. As the US Armed Forces withdraw from Afghanistan and more service members transition to civilian life, it will be more important than ever that we all continue to work together to meet the needs of the changing veteran community. The Red Cross is committed to working side by side with the VA and other organizations to provide the network of support our veterans deserve.

I am pleased to address any questions you may have and look forward to working with members of Senate Veterans Affairs Committee and others to support our veterans and their families.

Thank you.