



HOUGHTON COUNTY VETERAN SERVICE OFFICE

23810 Airpark Blvd, Suite 130
Calumet, MI 49913
(906) 482-0102

March 19, 2024

United States Representative Jack Bergman
414 Cannon HOB
Washington, DC 20515

To the Honorable Jack Bergman,

The Houghton County Veterans Affairs Board requests your assistance to re-establish regular, in-person Vet Center Counseling Services for Houghton, Keweenaw, Baraga, and Ontonagon Counties.

The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs operates Vet Centers across the Nation that provide a wide range of social and psychological services to eligible Veterans and their families at no cost to Veterans. There are eight Vet Centers in the State of Michigan, with only one located within the 15 counties of the Upper Peninsula. According to the National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics, there are 27,000 Veterans residing across the over 16,000 square miles of the geographically isolated peninsula.

At the beginning of 2022, the Vet Center Counselor for the Houghton and surrounding counties area was seeing between eight and ten Veterans or family members a day, exceeding the Vet Center standard of six appointments per day. The position was vacated later in the year, and has not been back-filled since, leaving Veterans and family members without critical, lifesaving services for over a year, and denying all additional requests for new, in-person counseling. The Vet Center has advertised availability of tele-health counseling for Veterans in lieu of in-person counseling; however a majority of Veterans, especially Vietnam Era Veterans, do not have the capability, access, and/or are unwilling to participate in online counseling.

In March 2023 an inquiry was made to the Escanaba Vet Center Director, who stated the position was not filled because the prior donated office space for the Counselor was no longer available. The Director further stated the position could be filled if a new location was provided. Consequently, office space was located at the Hancock Salvation Army Community Building and an agreement document, provided by the Vet Center, was sent through the Salvation Army Territorial and Divisional Headquarters and approved.. The signed agreement was submitted to the Escanaba Vet Center in on July 20, 2023 and on July 26, 2023 the Escanaba Vet Center stated that the full time position in the Houghton County area no longer existed, but that a position for a full time position stationed out of Escanaba for the purpose of covering the Sault Ste Marie, MI and Houghton County areas was approved.



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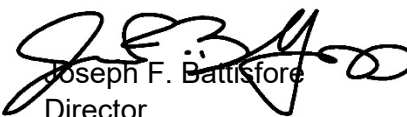
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The one-way distance between Escanaba, MI and Houghton, MI is 160 miles. The one-way distance between Escanaba, MI and Sault Ste Marie, MI is 174 miles. The one-way distance between Houghton, MI and Sault Ste Marie, MI is 264 miles. A Vet Center employee covering these distances would spend a majority of her or his time traveling between areas, making this an impossibly large coverage area for in-person counseling.

The continued lack of regular, in-person Vet Center Counseling services for Houghton, Keweenaw, Baraga, and Ontonagon Counties poses an immediate, serious threat to the health of the Veterans and their family members of those counties. The Houghton County Veterans Affairs Board requests that a full time position be re-established in the Houghton County area as soon as possible to ensure we continue to meet the Vet Center's motto of "Keeping the Promise" to our Veterans. To do otherwise would be indefensible.

The Point of Contact for this memorandum is the undersigned at VSO@houghtoncounty.net / 906-482-0102. Points of Contact for the Vet Center and Salvation Army are provided below.

Very Respectfully,



Joseph F. Battisfore
Director

Houghton County Veteran Service Office

Additional Points of Contact:

Vet Center:
Ronald Harsh, Director
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906-233-0244

Salvation Army:
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