

Gary M. De Gasta, COL US Army (Ret.)  
Testimony  
Before the Senate Government Operations  
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**Point of Contact:** Olivia Parker, Committee Assistant  
Senate Government Operations, Room 4 and Zoom  
Office of Legislative Operations

Good afternoon. For the record, my name is Gary De Gasta. I am a retired US Army Medical Department Colonel. I am also a retired US Department of Veterans Affairs Senior Healthcare Executive and, for two decades (1987-2008), I served as the Director of the White River Junction, VA Medical Center (WRJ VAMC).

While I have been invited to speak today in my role as Chairperson of the Governor's Veterans Advisory Council (GVAC), full disclosure, I am also the President of the Board of Trustees, Vermont Veterans Home (VVH), Bennington, Vermont.

I believe these two leadership positions, combined with four decades of civilian and military healthcare experience, uniquely position me to understand and appreciate the needs and concerns of Vermont veterans and their families and the healthcare organizations which support them.

As I will state later in my testimony, **the GVAC as well as the VVH and its Board of Trustees, whole-heartedly support and encourage the passage of H-794.**

The VVH is a State Veterans Home licensed to meet all levels of resident care needs in its Bennington facility, **Vermont Statute does not currently permit the VVH to provide healthcare services anywhere other than on its Bennington campus.** To thrive and survive in today's competitive healthcare environment the VVH **must be authorized to offer more than just 24/7 Skilled Nursing Home care in Southwestern Vermont!** The Home must be enabled to deliver essential community-based programs such as adult day healthcare and home healthcare -- services which enable veterans to remain in their homes and/or facilitate an earlier discharge from the VVH, the VAMC or a community hospital, to return home more quickly, significantly reducing healthcare costs and providing better clinical outcomes.

Vermont is fortunate to have two outstanding organizations serving the healthcare needs of its veterans -- one State -- The Vermont Veterans Home and the other Federal -- the White River Junction VA Medical Center. VVH's CEO, **Melissa Jackson**, and the WRJ VAMC's Executive Director, **Dr. Brett Rusch**, are consummate healthcare professionals who collaboratively work on behalf of Vermont Veterans. **Both also serve on the GVAC as Ex Officio members** and both keep the GVAC informed about their organizational accomplishments, challenges and needs.

The VVH's Strategic Plan (approved by its Board in February 2021 and updated annually) and its recently-concluded Market Study, evidence that, **in order to better serve Vermont veterans into the future, the Home must consider diversifying and expanding its programs and services beyond the confines of its Bennington campus.**

Not unexpectedly, the VVH is currently experiencing the same critical nursing and other employee shortages which plague our nation's healthcare

industry. The VVH too has had to contract for staff, at exorbitant costs, just to deliver its core services!

**For some time to come, the Home's primary focus will be on employee stabilization and the reduction of its contracted personnel costs and NOT adding or expanding services to a new location!**

While the VVH's leadership diligently works to address the Home's personnel and budget challenges, it must also continue to think and plan strategically to include: evaluating the need for, and feasibility of, implementing new programs and services, potential future geographical expansion, and exploring opportunities for partnering with organizations, such as the VA, to help implement and fund future activities.

**In closing, the statutory changes spelled out in H.794 will NOT require the State of Vermont to spend a single penny! What H.794 will provide is the governance authority necessary for the Vermont Veterans Home to plan for, and to deliver, twenty-first century healthcare to Vermont's deserving veterans and their families -- reasons why the Governor's Veterans Advisory Council supports and endorses the passage of H.794.**

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today and I welcome your comments or questions.