

A week after holding a roundtable in Rutland to discuss mental health care for veterans, Rep. Peter Welch on Wednesday introduced new legislation in the House to break down barriers to treatment by increasing access to long-distance mental health services.

During the roundtable at Rutland VFW Post 648, Welch heard from veterans' representatives and mental health experts about the promise of telehealth and telemedicine, which allow veterans to receive treatment remotely. Telehealth services help reduce the stigma sometimes associated with seeking mental health services and the distance rural veterans must travel to their closest VA medical center.

Welch's new legislation, the Veterans Telehealth Improvement Act, encourages the use of such services by eliminating the copayment required of veterans.

"In rural states like Vermont, too many barriers exist between veterans and the care they need. Distance from providers should not be among them," Welch said. "As I heard in Rutland last week, Congress can and should do more to promote telehealth services. This legislation is an important first step."

Telehealth is a partnership between the Department of Veterans Affairs and local clinics that together offer health care treatment over the phone or via broadband. The VA launched its first such partnership with a Richford-based clinic last year and is expanding to five other locations in Vermont and New Hampshire.

Veterans' representatives and health officials expect an increase in the need for health care services as members of the Vermont Guard currently deployed to Afghanistan return home.