

[By Neal Goswami](#)

Vermont Democratic Rep. Peter Welch and Republican Rep. Chris Gibson from nearby New York are teaming up to sponsor a bill to extend a Vermont Guard outreach program across the country.

Welch and a member of Gibson's staff visited the grounds of the Vermont Veterans Home in Bennington Monday to announce the bipartisan National Guard Outreach Act. Vermont became the first state in 2006 to offer an outreach program to help veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan find access to needed services.

Welch said the program was started through an earmark secured by Vermont independent Sen. Bernie Sanders. Seven other states have adopted similar models since then. Vermont's congressional delegation has sought renewed funding for the program every since.

The end of earmarks in Congress means the program must be included in the federal budget, Welch said. He said he and Gibson, who has served 24 years in the Army, are hoping to secure permanent funding for a national program.

"We're working very hard to find ways to work together on things we know Vermonters and New Yorkers and Americans think make sense," Welch said.

Gibson, a member of the House Armed Services Committee who represents Washington and Rensselaer counties in New York, has worked to ensure testimony will be heard on the bill, Welch said.

"He's working extremely hard on this," Welch said. "Nobody speaks more eloquently about the need for this and the value of it than Congressman Gibson."

The program helps veterans secure health care services, marriage and financial counseling, substance abuse treatment and other services National Guard members need when returning from deployment, according to Welch.

"It is about recognizing that our men and women who serve our country, when they come home and they're on their own, have needs. The outreach program was very, very helpful in Vermont with reintegration with many of our soldiers," Welch said.

Outreach specialists are veterans who can relate to the difficulties returning soldiers and their families face. Returning soldiers are often more comfortable accepting help from fellow veterans, said Brigadier Gen. Thomas Drew, the deputy adjutant general of the Vermont National Guard.

"Sometimes all it takes is somebody just talking to you," Drew said. "When there's an identified

problem, our specialists are trained and have the knowledge to link that individual to someone that can help solve the problem."

The Vermont National Guard contracts with an outside company who trains and provides the outreach specialists, Drew said. The Vermont program costs about \$3.1 million, he said.

Welch said expanding the program nationwide is expected to cost about \$70 million. "It's money well spent," he said. "The cost of the war, in my view, always has to include the cost of taking care of the warrior."

Welch said the legislation can be paid for several ways, but suggested ending subsidies for ethanol.

"How do we pay for it? My favorite -- we could just eliminate ethanol subsidies. We're wasting \$6 billion a year on that, why not spend \$70 million to help our soldiers get the care that is theirs," he said.

Drew said annual funding would eliminate the question of whether the program will continue from year to year.

"Each year you cross your fingers and hope someone agrees that that funding can be added to the budget. What the congressman is attempting to do, which is the best action that can happen for us, is to put it into the federal budget so that it is funded on a yearly basis," he said.

Sgt. Tom Burke, who was deployed with his son in Afghanistan last year with the Bennington unit of the Vermont National Guard, said the program has been helpful for his family. An outreach specialist has helped him receive hearing aids after losing most of his hearing in a blast.

"It's been fantastic and they're always helpful. They're always trying to help, Burke said. "Times

are tough for these young soldiers returning. They have trouble communicating with their families, readjusting. There's a lot of depression."

Burke said the program provides more assistance to veterans than ever before in his 32-year military career. "It's a Godsend. It really is," he said. "It does help."

Patrick Ziegler, a member of Gibson's staff, said the congressman is pleased to work across party lines -- and the state line -- on the legislation.

"We're very proud to be cosponsoring this legislation and working with (Welch) on this important bill, he said. "The points that (Welch) raised ... is something that we see in our district office on almost a daily basis. We're proud to work with those veterans."

Welch said the bill has support in Congress, but it's not clear if it will pass as Congress looks to trim government spending.

"This is simple. It's bipartisan. It's veterans helping veterans. It's really a very modest amount of money for a huge return. It's really all about that direct connection. It's not bureaucracy," he said. "I can't predict whether it will pass but I'll tell you this -- it should."