ID # (assigned by CSG): 12-E-03-CT

Please provide the following information, adding space as necessary:

State: Connecticut

Assign Program Category (applicant): Human Resources & Education (Use list at end of application)

Program Name: Oasis Center
Administering Agency: CT Dept. of Veterans Affairs, CT Dept. of Labor, CT University System, UCONN
Contact (Name and Title): Linda Schwartz, Commissioner CT Dept. of Veterans Affairs
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1. How long has this program operated (month and year)? Note: the program must be between 9 months and 5 years old as of April 5, 2012 to be eligible for this year’s award. Program began in 2008.

2. Describe the program:

Why was this program created?
In 2003, the first major contingents of the Connecticut National Guard were deployed to Iraq and later to Afghanistan. Almost 17,000 Connecticut Residents have been mobilized and deployed to the combat areas since 9/11. In an effort to assess the needs of these returning veterans, the Connecticut Department of Veteran Affairs embarked on a multipronged approach to assess the needs of these veterans and their families. The objective was to use this information to identify gaps in services and to develop programs which specifically addressed these needs. We believed that hearing directly from the veterans would also be a valuable tool for legislators and policymakers to assess the present systems and make changes including legislative remedies and resource allocation.
The first effort was a “Summit For Returning Veterans” which was held in conjunction with the William O’Neil Center for Public Policy at Central Connecticut State University. The concept for this event was to actually generate discussion and recommendations for solutions from Operations Enduring and Iraqi Freedom (OEF/OIF) veterans and their families about challenges they encountered in transitioning home from the war. We also were looking for their suggestions and expectations for policy and programs that might be considered by the Connecticut General Assembly, the public and Connecticut State Governmental Agencies.

Break Out Sessions featured (Health Care, Transition, Benefits, Families, Education and Employment, Women Veterans and Coping with Head Injuries) were chaired by Non-Governmental Experts in the Fields and Commissioners and/or Directors of State Agencies. Each Session was asked to produce at least 3 suggestions for improvements to the present delivery systems. At the Summit “Wrapup Session” we invited State and Federal Legislators to attend to hear firsthand what the veterans had to say. The goal was to use these discussions and suggestions to provide substantive information on the issues facing newly returned/discharged veterans in our State and to develop “a road map for future veterans’ care in Connecticut.”

From the Education Session, we learned that many veterans were looking forward to using their GI Bill benefits which at that time were not as generous as they are today. However the veterans were consistent in their feelings that they felt isolated and out of place on campus, some were struggling to transition to academic settings and others felt the atmosphere was hostile and unwelcoming. Another finding in the Summit was the fact that many veterans did not want to take time from classes or work to meet with Benefits Counselors, Veteran Employment and Training Field Representatives or Vet Center Staff because the time commitment interfered with their major goal of education and/or work.

For example Joe O’Keefe, a twenty five year old combat Marine, was one of over 1000 veteran students at Central Connecticut State University. He stated that he sometimes just wanted to be around other vets who knew what it was like to have seen the world through the ever vigilant eyes of combat. How do you describe to an 18-year old schoolmate what it was like to bury a comrade who was killed by a thirteen year old with an AK-47? Joel Patrick Leger, a former Blackhawk helicopter crew chief, had also returned from deployment to attend Central. He missed the fellowship of his fellow soldiers, and found civilian college a difficult adjustment. “We don’t have our battle buddies to hang out with anymore.” Coping with crowded lecture halls, volumes of paperwork demanded by
the GI Bill and dealing with PTSD, family issues, anxiety and the other common issues for returning veterans made studying more difficult. After much discussion and collaboration, the OASIS Center concept was developed.

**Why is it a new and creative approach or method?**

We believe that the program which is presently in place maximized the utilization of existing resources and present an excellent example how agencies can work together in a cost effective way to develop quality services which address real needs and problems. Because America depends so heavily on the true citizen soldiers of the National Guard and Reserve Forces, making a successful transition from uniformed service to community and family settings is both daunting and challenging. The Post 9/11 GI Bill provides housing allowances, stipends, tuition reimbursement and payment of fees associated with education and training. While veterans look to the GI Bill as their ticket to the future, Connecticut veterans reported a disappointing 18% average for completion of their course of study and graduation. Creating an “OASIS” on campus presented a very unique setting to facilitate mutual and peer support opportunities which could realistically help students stay in school and/or find the resources they needed to be successful in their studies. The returning veterans’ “SOS” for help in making the transition from civilian to student life was immediately translated into action. With enthusiasm, strong will and with minimal public funding new OASIS Centers have opened up on 11 college campuses including the flagship of the system the University of Connecticut.

OASIS is a State of Connecticut Department of Veteran Affairs initiative which partnered with the Department of Labor Veterans’ Employment and Training Program and individual State Community Colleges and Universities to provide a safe location on each Connecticut campus where returning veteran students can study, meet, socialize, communicate, support each other and navigate some of the courses, vocational, cultural, and political waters in these academic settings. Each College and University had to first provide a free, comfortable, accessible location on campus which would serve as a place of respite, for veterans from the hustle and stress of classrooms and academic challenges. Additionally, the “Oasis” also serves as a point of contact for veterans in accessing supportive programs available through local, state and federal agencies. These Centers are also a place where information as well as briefings and updates on changes in veteran benefits, services and programs. VA Vet Center Mental Health Counselors also use these sites to conduct outreach, provide support programs and meet with clients. These support and information activities provide vital assistance to
veterans in higher education which enhance their opportunities and foundations for success in school.

Community partners from the General Federation of Women’s clubs of Connecticut and the American Association of University Women in Danbury and many corporations and local businesses as well as veterans’ service organizations provided support, materials, furniture, computers and comfort items for the OASIS Centers. The US Department of Veterans’ Affairs participated in this project by providing veteran work study internships housed in the OASIS Centers, outreach and information on the VA Vocational Rehabilitation Program and by scheduling Vet Center Counseling appointments and group discussions in the OASIS Centers. Connecticut Department of Veterans Service Officers provide benefits materials and workshops to assist veterans in accessing the benefits they have earned. The state Labor Dept. assists with employment and training, discussions and outreach on applying for jobs. work –study programs and job training and placement information.

**What are the specific activities and operations of the program in chronological order?**

After the concept was formulated, we began with briefings for the President and Chancellor of the Community College and State University systems and their Student Affairs Officers about the findings of the summit and the proposal to create “OASIS Centers” on each campus to provide a place for veterans to study and hopefully get to know each other. In some cases, setting aside the space for these Centers was not as easy as expected. However with the opening of the first Center and the success of this venture, word quickly spread throughout the Connecticut Department of Higher Education Colleges and Universities that this was a project worthy of support. The support of Community partners especially the Connecticut General Federation of Women’s Clubs and Veteran Service Organizations like Vietnam Veterans of America and Disabled American Veterans was most heartening. There was a great deal of local pride in the development of each Center and the furnishings, computers, provisions and supplies provided. Most “OASIS Centers” feature lounge space with a large flat screen TV, space for meetings, refrigerators, coffee pots and private study carrels with computers.

Student Veterans have been very creative in shaping the program and activities of these centers. In some places support programs held in the OASIS, include yoga for vets, meetings with professionals who conduct group counseling, and visits by members of American Corporate Partners, a nationwide mentoring program
dedicated to helping veterans transition from the armed services to private enterprise. Trophy cases for military memorabilia from students, faculty, staff, and alums, and 12” bronze seals from each branch of the military – an expression of honor and appreciation, also are featured.

Is it effective? Provide tangible results and examples.

The college campuses with OASIS Centers are lively places where “battle buddies” become “study buddies” and counselors are available to assist with academic or personal issues. Veteran Pride and increased awareness about the needs of veterans and their presence on campus is definitely an unanticipated consequence of this program. Each of these Connecticut’s campuses now boasts a Veteran’s Club and faculty staff coordinators fostering regular meetings and events to provide support and awareness of the needs of veteran students. Veteran and Patriotic observances have enriched the academic communities and prepared these institutions for the veterans now returning from deployments and service in the combat areas. We believe the OASIS Centers enhance the supports to veterans using the GI Bill to attend College. This is an important point because the components of the GI Bill are America’s investment in the future of these veterans. These Centers enrich the experience and the potential our returning troops have earned and deserved for successful completion of their studies and graduation. This program is a modest, efficient and effective support system which has become a touchstone for veterans and a visible sign that they are valued on campus and throughout the State of Connecticut.

When there is an OASIS Center on campus, veterans see this as a sign they are welcome. This project has become so valuable it is seen as a drawing card for Student and is advertised in the brochures and websites of the participating institutions. The funding for the new GI Bill has made veterans much sought after consumers of higher education which Colleges and Universities are actively recruiting. Tunxis Community College which dedicated their first OASIS Center in 2009 has seen an increased demand for this program and will be dedicating a new larger space to accommodate the growing needs of their student veterans next month. Our most recent addition to the OASIS network came last month we dedicated a new OASIS Center at the University of Connecticut which attracted the support and attendance of UConn President Susan Herbst.

Her comments are the best evidence that OASIS Centers and the collaborative efforts of State Agencies and non-profit organizations to set aside space for veterans have become an integral part of the thinking and student communities across Connecticut. President Herbst observed that “Student veterans are one
of our Nation's most vital assets in that they have a vested interest in making America globally strong and competitive in a very challenging economic environment. These veterans have made a personal commitment to protect America's global position, while serving in uniform and deserve the advantages that such an OASIS space can provide. All Universities, colleges or centers for higher learning should feel compelled to do the same for their resident, student veterans.”

3. Did this program originate in your state? If YES, please indicate the innovator’s name, present address, telephone number, and e-mail address. Yes, at the CT Department of Veterans’ Affairs, 287 West Street, Rocky, Hill, CT 06067, 860-616-3603, linda.schwartz@po.state.ct.us

4. Are you aware of similar programs in other states? If YES, which ones and how does this program differ? Each College and University usually has a “Veterans Financial Aid” Office which addresses that particular aspect of the college experience. We also know that there are Veteran Centers on individual campuses. However we are not aware of any program which has been adopted and operational in the entire State University and College systems. to this

5. What limitations or obstacles might other states expect to encounter when attempting to adopt this program? This program requires the approval/buy in of the University and Academic community to provide the space for veterans. Requires a coordinator to work with non-profits, to furnish the centers. We chose to use the university system within the state of CT because the program had the support of several state agencies as well as the Governor of the State of Connecticut. Once space is secured, outreach to furnish the space was very easy and mostly word of mouth. We found that communities were enthusiastic about making the OASIS something special for the vets.

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Use these as guidelines to determine the appropriate Program Category for your state's submission and list that program category on page one of this application. Choose only one.

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