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House Veterans' Affairs Committee Symposium on PTSD

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Opening Statement

Thank you Chairman Filner and the members of the Committee for allowing me to be part addressing the critical needs of those who bear the burden of fighting our wars.

This morning I will ask you to consider two actions to remove barriers to obtaining immediate and effective help for men and women returning from combat deployments.

First, you can very quickly enact a special benefit empowering all service members returning from deployments involving combat operations to acquire assistance outside of their command or VA authority. The second action you can take is to encourage use of expanded types and modalities of services both within the VA system and outside of it.

I am a certified traumatic stress specialist with over 25 years experience in the treatment of post-traumatic stress. I know that the earlier the intervention the better. And I know that the most effective treatment must be designed to respond to the specific set of needs of the individual while providing a sense of safety and control throughout the process. The tragic failures of our current efforts are in evidence every day; in deaths from high risk behavior, alcohol and substance abuse, domestic violence, and loss of productive careers. As is well-documented, our social and military culture discourages many of our bravest service members from acknowledging the severe normal problems they experience and dissuade them from asking for help. The existence of programs such as the Vet Centers and the Fleet and Family Support Centers demonstrate acceptance of the need for alternative services and faster access to services. While these programs are effective, the need is now much greater than they can handle. We can and should do much more.

The special benefit you create will assure that all service members coming out of combat stress conditions can acquire assistance outside of their command or VA authority on their own terms. Service members could use this special benefit to obtain professional assistance with complete control as to location, time, professional type, and service type anonymously. The benefit will allow up to 30 individual, family, or collateral sessions at the time and place they choose with anonymity assured by law. This time limited benefit will be simple to use. A special identification number, inaccessible to any other government agency, will authorize payment of services to licensed mental health professionals of the service member's choosing. Using the social security administration to manage the program would demonstrate a serious commitment to assuring anonymity. The service members would not be required to disclose use of these services under any circumstances.

The second action you can take is to encourage use of expanded types and modalities of services both within the VA system and outside. Combat stress, as with all traumatic stress conditions are complex and manifest in a multitude of symptoms, disorders and syndromes- With physical injuries and other conditions this complexity increases. Treatments are not one size fits all. Current VA and military medical services inpatient programs do not have the capacity or variety of services to meet current needs, much less future need. Furthermore, clinicians in these systems are restricted from using many effective tools. Current restrictions on types of treatment allowed means many of those who are tortured the most by what they have gone through on our behalf continue to suffer needlessly. Thought Field Therapy, the most effective means I know of for eliminating the overwhelming symptoms of combat stress, and other effective therapies are prohibited by those with no knowledge or experience of them. This committee can shed light upon this problem and expand the clinicians' options to meet the specific needs of those they serve. In a broader context contracting outside the system for more and varied residential and outpatient services will assure that options are available to those whose needs are not met during their first course of treatment. These individuals should have access to alternative treatments when the months and years begin to pass with no relief using current standard failed treatments.

If we do not reduce the impact of combat stress on this generation now, future generations will pay the penalty of torn families, and emotional and psychological suffering, and lost resources. We must act now to expand access to services.

Thank you for considering these actions.

