

Op-ed: Veterans Fight Silent Battles at Home

Courage is often talked about but seldom witnessed. Each May, Americans come together on Memorial Day to remember those courageous souls who laid down their lives for our freedom. These service men and women did not answer the call to serve in the name of Republicans or Democrats; they did so to protect liberty and the American Dream for their children and grandchildren.

This month is also a time to recognize that the members of our Armed Forces who are fortunate to return from combat continue to fight battles at home – including silent battles with mental health. Since 1949, May has been observed as Mental Health Awareness Month – a time to expand awareness of the struggle of mental illness and help eliminate the stigmas that prevent many from seeking the treatment they need.

Members of our military are uniquely impacted by cognitive conditions like post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), major depression and traumatic brain injury (TBI). These invisible wounds of war plague thousands of veterans and service members across our country, and healing those wounds takes tremendous courage from both the individuals suffering and their families.

The Rand Corporation estimates that nearly 20 percent of veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan each year are diagnosed with PTSD, depression or have experienced a TBI. Yet, only half of those diagnosed seek the treatment they need – and just half of those who seek treatment receive adequate care. According to the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), 22 veterans commit suicide each day, while the average wait time for a mental health appointment at a VA facility is 36 days.

These staggering statistics underscore the need to hire of thousands of mental health professionals in the VA. Congress, the VA and our local communities must do everything we can to support those struggling with mental health issues resulting from their service to our country.

In January 2015, Congress took critical action to improve mental health care and increase suicide prevention resources for American service members by unanimously passing the Clay Hunt Suicide Prevention for American Veterans Act. I sponsored the legislation which was signed into law by the President, and is named for Clay Hunt, a Marine veteran who earned a Purple Heart for his service in Iraq and redeploying to southern Afghanistan. Clay suffered from PTSD for many years and struggled with inadequate care at his local VA hospital before taking his own life in March 2011 at the age of 28.

The law calls on the VA to create a centralized website for veterans to access information on VA mental health services, helps address the shortage of mental health experts by allowing the VA to recruit through a student loan repayment program, and requires the VA to collaborate on suicide prevention efforts with nonprofit mental health organizations.

The development of a robust VA mental health care system is going to take time, and more must be done in the interim. It is vital that we allow veterans to receive immediate mental health treatment from outside organizations and mental health professionals in their community. In fact, I've joined U.S. Senator Joni Ernst (R-Iowa) as a sponsor of the Prioritizing Veterans' Access to Mental Health Care Act (S.841), legislation to give veterans the option of outside care until they can receive comprehensive treatment through the VA system.

This is of particular importance to veterans in rural states like Kansas, where even under the

Veterans' Access, Choice, and Accountability Act of 2014 (Choice Act), too many veterans continue to struggle to access timely, quality care because their local VA facility does not offer mental health services. I continue to press the VA to utilize Community Mental Health Centers (CMHC) to address this shortfall because they offer 24/7 help and are located in every Kansas county. I have also challenged the VA on their lack of hiring capable licensed professional mental health counselors (LPMHC) and marriage and family therapists (MFT). These certified counselors make up only .04 percent of the total mental health workforce in the VA.

The courage of our service men and women has protected our democracy for generations and allowed us to live in the strongest, freest, greatest country in the world. It is our responsibility to make certain no veteran feels abandoned by the country they served once they summon the courage to tackle a mental health issue. I will keep working to find solutions and to hold the VA accountable for providing our nation's veterans with the timely, high-quality and specialized care they earned.

U.S. Sen. Jerry Moran is a member of the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee.

Many Signals Communications