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Mullen criticizes DOD, VA failures in mental health treatment

By [Leo Shane III](#), Stars and Stripes

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WASHINGTON – Joint Chiefs Chairman Adm. Mike Mullen said Wednesday he's frustrated and disappointed with the slow pace of treatments for post-traumatic stress and other "unseen" combat injuries, saying after eight years of war military officials should have better answers.

"Shame on us if we don't figure this out in time," he told a crowd of military and veterans officials. "We need to find a way to avoid another generation of homeless veterans."

Mullen's comments set the tone for a day of debate among mental health experts and military leaders at the Military Officers Association of America's annual defense forum. The chairman said that while millions of dollars have been invested into research on PTSD, traumatic brain injuries and mental health issues, military leaders have not produced enough treatment options and outreach programs to stay ahead of the problems.

"We owe them a response," he said. "This is a debt the country owes [these troops] for their service, as far as I'm concerned. It needs to be the first check we write."

A recent study by researchers at the Naval postgraduate school and Stanford University suggests that nearly 35 percent of U.S. troops returning from Iraq will suffer PTSD, and urges Department of Veterans Affairs leaders to invest more in counselors and response teams.

Conference speakers pushed for better "gold standards" for post-deployment assessments, ongoing monitoring of

returned veterans, and early treatment models, all resources that currently exist but are unevenly administered.

Mullen said he wants to see better coordination between VA programs and Defense Department mental health offerings, and more efforts to publicize what options are available to suffering troops and their families.

He also said both agencies must work more to reach out to community resources, finding ways for private charities and concerned citizens to help local veterans through the rehabilitation process.

Regardless, Mullen said, caring for the wounded veterans will take decades of funding and attention from government leaders.

"These are 20-somethings who are wounded ... they have 50, 60, 70 years left to live," he said. "That's where the sustained effort from us must come in."

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