

Chairman Calls for Better Mental Health Programs

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NORFOLK, Va. - The military's top officer today urged mental health providers to demonstrate leadership in developing effective programs to treat wounded warriors.

Navy Adm. Mike Mullen, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, spoke by teleconference to some 400 attendees gathered here for the Warrior Resilience Conference, sponsored by the Defense Centers of Excellence for Psychological Health and Traumatic Brain Injury.

The Defense Department has generated "a ton of programs" since the wars began in Afghanistan and Iraq, Mullen said, and on their face, all sound great. "But I need programs that work," he said. "I need programs where we can see results and see output. Anything we put in place, we really need to measure how we're doing."

Mullen urged participants to act on what they learn. "Demonstrate the leadership to say, 'Here are the ideas, now how do I turn that into reality?'" he said. "Many of you are in positions of responsibility. Don't wait for somebody else to do it. I hope and direct you to attack these problems for warriors and families."

Leading in this field is particularly challenging, the chairman said. "I see far too many individual efforts that are not particularly well-coordinated," he said.

The chairman urged the attendees to look beyond the department for help and solutions. The American people are looking for ways to help service members and their families, he said, and he encouraged the conferees to tap into the "immense sea of goodwill for service members that exists in this country."

Mullen cited the importance of creating the programs that build resilience. "I have seen servicemembers and their families demonstrate extraordinary resilience," he said. "I admire their ability to sustain operations at the pace we are in." And the need for resilience is not going to go away, he added.

"For the next year or so," Mullen said, "we will continue to shift our main effort from Iraq to Afghanistan, and the deployments are still going to be there."

But the chairman also provided the encouraging news that soldiers and Marines will start getting more "dwell time" at their home stations between deployments. "The two factors I focus on the most is the amount of dwell time and the number of deployments," he said.

Operations themselves affect resilience, Mullen said, noting that he was struck by the resilience of troops who participated in the successful troop surge in Iraq. "They left with a skip in their steps that wasn't present earlier," he said. "They got that skip because they knew they made a difference."

Transitions such as moving in and out of deployments, transitioning in and out of service or being wounded also affect resilience, the chairman told the conferees.. "Those are challenging times, and

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family support becomes more critical to resilience," he said. "The stronger the support network is, the stronger the service members and families are."

Speed of treatment and getting the right treatment are key to minimizing long-term effects on service members, he said. Leaders also need to smooth the transition between the departments of Defense and Veterans Affairs, and be aware of the needs of those transitioning, he added.

"We have too many troopers who get out who have been living very structured lives," he said. "Many of them have seen hell, and now they are out there all alone. They have no support network, and they don't know where to go to get help. We need to do everything we can to help."