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## Study links 'dwell time,' mental health

By: **Jen DiMascio**

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With President Barack Obama's decision to send more troops to Afghanistan putting an even greater strain on the U.S. military, a new Army study has found that soldiers deployed to Iraq have needed at least three years back at their home bases to regain their mental health.

Soldiers currently spend about a year home between deployments — what the military calls dwell time. The Army's goal has been to extend that to two years in the United States by 2011, but the surge of forces in Afghanistan will push that goal further into the future, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Adm. Michael Mullen, recently told reporters.

That's a reality that both the Obama administration and Congress, which Wednesday passed a bill to fund the Defense Department and wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, appear willing to accept. But the Army study was a clear warning of what the consequences could be.

"The analysis showed very clearly [that] the longer the soldier had dwell time, the better their mental health status was," said Lt. Col. Paul Bliese, a psychologist at Walter Reed Army Medical Center who helped guide the Army's sixth Mental Health Advisory Team study.

The more time soldiers spend at home, the study found, the fewer the reported signs of post-traumatic stress, depression and anxiety. But it takes three years stateside for a full recovery.

The series of studies conducted by Walter Reed have been following the mental health of soldiers since 2005, but this was the first to look at the impact of how much time soldiers spend in the United States between deployments. In addition to dwell time, the other prime driver of mental health problems was intensity of combat, Bliese said.

The time spent at home was even more important than the total amount of time deployed, Bliese said. Soldiers who were deployed 12 months and spent just 12 months at home reported more symptoms than those who were deployed in Iraq for two years if they had two years at home between deployments.

The Army has been criticized for its response to the increased number of cases of post-traumatic stress syndrome suffered by soldiers deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as a growing suicide rate. Last week, the Army said that 218 suicides have been reported among active, National Guard and Army Reserve soldiers this year, compared with 177 reported suicides in 2008.

The Army has said in the past that it can't prove a link between repeat deployments and suicide, but Army Vice Chief of Staff Gen. Peter Chiarelli told lawmakers he recently learned that soldiers with post-traumatic stress are six times more likely to commit suicide.

Ensuring more rest at home will depend largely on the Army's ability to draw down rapidly in Iraq after next year's elections, Chiarelli told lawmakers. There are 115,000 U.S. troops in the country now, and if all goes as planned with the drawdown in Iraq and the surge in Afghanistan, Chiarelli said, there should be only a brief time when that number increases.

One complicating factor is the Army's plan to eliminate stop-loss, which requires soldiers to stay in the military beyond their service obligation to complete a unit's rotation. Now, rather than mandating that soldiers remain in the military, soldiers are being offered bonuses to stay, and about half of the first unit being offered the deal opted to stay, Chiarelli said.

Without the ability to increase time at home for now, the Army is developing numerous programs to increase the mental resilience of soldiers — including a “comprehensive soldier fitness” program that trains soldiers to strengthen their mental health. “It is going to take time for that to get totally in place and for us to see resiliency continue to grow or start to grow at appreciable rates in our service,” Chiarelli said.

By and large, the impact of sending more U.S. troops into combat in Afghanistan received scant attention during the high-powered hearings with Pentagon and State Department officials in the past few weeks.

That doesn't mean the difficulties weren't considered, said Sen. Jack Reed (D-R.I.), who has the ear of top administration officials on all matters military.

“It is not being ignored,” Reed told POLITICO. “We've come a long way since the middle of the Iraq war.”

The only real solution to the problem, Reed and others said, is to vastly increase the size of the Army. “Given the number of troops we have, the math leads to more frequent deployments and shorter dwell time.”

Rep. Susan Davis (D-Calif.), who leads the House Armed Services Committee's Military Personnel Subcommittee, agreed, saying the Army's ranks would have to swell to about 800,000 to expand the amount of time soldiers can spend at home — a price the nation can't afford right now.

“It's a problem,” Davis said. “We wish that weren't the case.”

Rep. Marcy Kaptur (D-Ohio) said she'll be pressing the administration for more information. “If this is going to be this type of long-term engagement, where's the rest of the country?” Kaptur asked. “If this is what we are going to do, I think that the impact on our military is very, very nefarious.”

Kaptur is working with Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland to study the mental health effects of war on the Ohio National Guard.

“When you see the thousand-mile stare — and I have seen it — that is not a prescription for a healthy Army,” Kaptur said.