



## Military attacks mental health stigmas

June 23, 2010

By Rachel Stevens  
Federal News Radio

The stigma of seeking treatment is a leading obstacle to dealing with mental health concerns, military officials say.

Several military leaders testified before the [Senate Armed Services Committee](#) on Tuesday about their progress in coping with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), traumatic brain injuries (TBI) and reducing the suicide rate among service personnel.

Army vice Chief of Staff Gen. Peter Chiarelli says the military is working to provide better access to care through technology. He says a program has recently been implemented to provide soldiers with [instantaneous online counseling](#). This, he says, can avoid stigma problems by keeping needed aid confidential.

"This generation in many times opens up much greater using . . . technology . . . than you and I sitting across the room right here. And they really feel they are able to get at some of these issues and do a good evaluation," Chiarelli says.

Veterans Health Administration (VHA) acting Principal Deputy Under Secretary for health Dr. Robert Jesse agrees that technology would be "vital." He says VHA is looking to develop smartphone applications to increase access to mental health services.

Marine Corps Assistant Commandant Gen. James Amos says his branch has launched a special telephone crisis hotline ran by Marines, for Marines. Jesse says these types of hotlines have saved over 9,000 lives.

Jesse says VHA also has recently launched a similar online chat service that allows troubled veterans to get counseling anonymously through the Internet.

"Younger folks are much more used to chatlines on the Web than they are to having phone conversations, and that's been an emerging way to contact younger people" who make up the majority of military suicide cases, Jesse says.

Jesse says the anonymity of the Internet could reduce the fear of seeking treatment. "Using new technologies that the people who need it understand- and prefer to use- I think is going to be vital," he says.

Each panelist also says they are committed to training leadership about the importance of mental health care for soldiers. This, they say, may reduce the cultural stigma of treatment.

Vice Chief of Naval Operations Adm. Jonathan Greenert says the Navy has already hosted awareness and training workshops at 20 locations in five countries this year and has plans to hold five more. These are meant to teach soldiers to look for warning signs in their peers and to encourage them to get treatment when needed.

The Navy has also created a training video and several interactive training exercises "aimed at strengthening a culture of support," Greenert says. He says these efforts have already reached over 120,000 personnel.

The panelists also say greater scientific understanding of brain functioning, increased recruitment of mental health professionals, and preparing soldiers mentally for the stresses of war are important steps.

Each says dealing with mental health issues is at the top of his branch's agenda.

"We are committed to exploring every possible solution and using every resource available to us," says Amos. "We will not rest until we have turned this around."

*Rachel Stevens is an intern at Federal News Radio.*

[back](#)