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Mental health counseling a must for some vets

AUGUST 20, 2010

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The story of Army Sergeant Coleman Bean is a tragedy that may have been prevented. Sgt. Bean was a son of East Brunswick, who served in Iraq. He came home carrying the psychological scars of war and ultimately was driven by those burdens to take his own life.

Had he been a member of the New Jersey National Guard, he would have been directed when he returned home to psychological counseling provided by the New Jersey Veterans Helpline (1-866-VETS-NJ-4), a service operated by the University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey. But as a member of the Individual Ready Reserve, a group of soldiers not permanently assigned to army units, he was not guided to seek similar support.

There are now bills in Congress, introduced by Sen. Frank Lautenberg and Rep. Rush Holt, both D-N.J., that effectively address this situation for Sergeant Bean's fellow soldiers. The bills mandate regular contacts by qualified mental health professionals with returning reservists, or other soldiers, who are not assigned to a unit. This provision resembles our current program for the National Guard.

Since our program was begun five years ago, not a single suicide has occurred among returning New Jersey National Guard members. This record has drawn deserved attention from military officials as a potential model for programs nationwide.

Christopher Kosseff

NEWARK
 The writer is President/CEO, University Behavioral HealthCare at the University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey.

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