

I-TEAM TICKER

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VA Mental Health Caseload Climbing: New Report

BY **Lisa Chedekel** | OCT 26, 2011 1:59 PM

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Posted to: [Eye on Veterans](#)

The number of Iraq and Afghanistan veterans receiving mental health care from the VA has quadrupled since 2006, with PTSD and depression the most common diagnoses, a new report by the federal Government Accountability Office shows.

The report shows that over a five-year period from 2006 through 2010, more than 2 million veterans received mental health care from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. Iraq and Afghanistan veterans accounted for an increasing proportion of those veterans—from 4 percent in the 2006 fiscal year, to 12 percent in 2010. That percentage continues to grow, veterans' advocates say.

In 2010, more than 139,000 Iraq and Afghanistan veterans received mental health care from the VA—up from just 34,500 in 2006.

In Connecticut, VA figures show that more than 7,600 Iraq and Afghanistan veterans received some kind of VA care in the one-year period between Oct. 1, 2010 and Oct. 1, 2011, with about 280 receiving mental health care. Data through March 2011 show that more than 2,190 Iraq and Afghanistan veterans had been treated for potential PTSD by the VA and vet centers in Connecticut. Nationally, more than 202,000 veterans of those wars have been seen by the VA for possible PTSD.

The GAO report identifies key barriers that hinder veterans from accessing mental health care from the VA, including stigma, lack of awareness of mental health care services, logistical challenges to accessing care, and special concerns about the VA care offered. For example, the report found, younger veterans may be reluctant to seek VA care because of concerns that the health care system primarily serves older, Vietnam-era veterans.

Similarly, female veterans may perceive that VA care is male-oriented, the GAO study suggested. Women are a growing demographic in the veteran population—from fiscal year 2010 to 2020, the percentage of women among total veterans is projected to increase from about 8 percent to about 10 percent, according to VA estimates.

VA officials said they have taken a number of steps to expand the agency's mental health care services, including increasing the mental health staff from about 14,000 in fiscal year 2006 to more than 21,000 in fiscal year 2011; expanding the availability of telephone-based mental health services; and integrating mental health care into its primary care settings. Specifically, VA now requires its primary care clinics to conduct mental health screenings and has placed mental health care providers in some primary care

settings.

While veterans' advocates applaud those moves, they remain concerned that the VA is not able to keep up with the growing number of returning troops who need psychological help, especially those in rural or remote areas.

In a separate report, VA statistics show that VA's Crisis Line, which was set up in 2007 as a suicide prevention hotline, has fielded more than 460,000 calls to date and claims more than 16,800 "rescues" of veterans and active-duty service members. Suicides of troops who serve in Iraq and Afghanistan has been a concern of both veterans' advocates and military leaders, who have implemented a host of outreach and education programs to try to reduce suicide rates.

Tags: [mental health needs](#), [veterans](#)

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posted by: [Diane Craig](#) on **October 31, 2011 9:15am**

I would like to add that VA in many areas offers Home Telehealth services for PTSD and Depression. This program has helped many veterans of all ages dealing with mental health issues. This is offered for free with a consult from the Mental Health Provider for the patient. Besides being fun and informative, it has greatly decreased in house admissions and gives the patient a connection with an RN reviewing information for the veteran daily. I am excited to be able to work in this program to keep our veterans safe, informed and involved in their health care.

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