

Study probes brain injury, mental health program efficacy

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By Colleen Flaherty
Killeen Daily Herald

A new study found there's little communication between the military's more than 200 programs treating brain injury or mental health.

The Rand Corp.'s report, which was commissioned by the Defense Department, found redundancies between programs and recommends centralizing results to optimize care.

"The good news is, there are a lot of programs to assist military service members who are dealing with such psychological health issues as post-traumatic stress disorder or major depression, or the short- and long-term psychological and cognitive consequences of a traumatic brain injury," said Robin M. Weinick, the study's lead author. "But our work suggests that there is significant duplication of effort, both within and across branches of service."

Cynthia O. Smith, a Defense Department spokesperson, said the military asked Rand to conduct a study that would create a framework for assessing the effectiveness of current programs, evaluate some existing programs and help the department develop a way to assess programs on its own in the future.

The Defense Centers of Excellence for Psychological Health and Traumatic Brain Injury "recognized that there are a wide range of activities under way across the Defense Department and the services, (but) very little is known about how all of these programs work collectively for our service members, veterans and their families," Smith said in an email interview. "Even less is known about the effectiveness of these efforts due to a lack of data needed to evaluate the individual programs."

Carrie Farmer, the study's co-author, said fewer than a third of programs in any branch of service were assessed for effectiveness in the past year.

Collaboration at Darnall

Although redundancies exist military-wide, the Army has established systems to avoid them, according to information from Fort Hood's Carl R. Darnall Medical Center. The hospital participates in the Army surgeon general's Comprehensive Behavioral Health System of Care, which works to standardize and coordinate care across the Army. Standardized systems of care at Darnall include its psychiatry and psychology programs, Resilience and Restoration Center and Department of Medicine Traumatic Brain Injury Clinic.

Lt. Col. Sharette K. Gray, chief of behavioral health, said there's "significant collaboration between the different research, research-based treatment programs, and the existing clinical care systems at Fort Hood."

In addition to collaboration among care providers regarding shared patients, "research and research-based treatment programs and existing clinical care systems also collaborate regarding treatments offered by them, to capitalize on treatments that have been shown to be effective and to increase access and availability of such treatments to patients," Gray said in an email.

Darnall also offers two non-standardized alternative medicine centers — the Warrior Combat Stress Reset Program to soldiers with PTSD who will to remain in the Army, and an intensive outpatient program for soldiers with addiction problems.

The study, released earlier this month, is one of three that will address the Defense Department's concerns. Coming studies will address the effectiveness of some programs and how the department can monitor their effectiveness on its own.

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