

Mental Health: Not Just a DoD/VA Issue

MOAA joined DoD and VA representatives and a wide-range of government and non-government mental health and family support professionals at an April 11 roundtable, hosted by U.S. Medicine Institute for Health Studies, to discuss mental health care and resources for military, veterans and their families.

The real issue that surfaced during discussions was the lack of capacity in DoD and VA health care systems to address the growing number of service members and their families who are dealing with mental health and readjustment issues as a result of deployment.

"Mental health care access is a nationwide issue that requires several levels of funding and attention -- no one support system can handle the increasing demand," said, CDR Rene Campos, USN (Ret), of MOAA's government relations department.

On the heels of the roundtable, RAND Health, an independent, nonprofit health policy research group, released a report titled, **"Invisible Wounds of War: Psychological and Cognitive Injuries, Their Consequences, and Services to Assist Recovery."**

The RAND study revealed that about **one in five Iraq and Afghanistan veterans suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) or major depression and another 10 percent experience some level of traumatic brain injury (TBI).** RAND studied the psychological and cognitive needs of all service members deployed in the past six years. The study entailed:

- A national survey of service members who have been deployed
- Economic modeling to estimate the cost of not providing appropriate treatment (including loss of productivity and suicide)
- An evaluation of treatment services available to service members and barriers to that treatment

It was the first study of its kind to **estimate that PTSD and depression among service members will cost the nation up to \$6.2 billion in the two years after deployment. The study concludes that investing in proper treatment would actually save \$2 billion within two years** by improving the capacity of members and families to return to productive work.

Researchers stated that "a major national effort is needed to expand and improve the capacity of the mental health system to provide effective care to service members and veterans. The effort must include the military, **veteran and civilian health care systems**, and should focus on training more providers to use high-quality, evidence-based treatment methods and encouraging service members and veterans to seek care."

The report cites that psychological injuries are more common for military members and veterans than those with physical injuries. The real challenge is how to develop enough providers to meet the need. Rand and MOAA believe this will take a national campaign to:

- **increase DoD's and VA's in-house mental health capacity, to attract more providers to see TRICARE beneficiaries**
- **increase incentive, education, and training programs to encourage more military people, veterans, and civilians to enter mental health delivery and counseling fields**
- **reduce stigma associated with seeking care and instill confidence that getting needed care will enhance, rather than detract from, service members' career opportunities**