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Press Release

Opening Statement of Congressman John M. McHugh Military Personnel Subcommittee Hearing on Mental Health

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Military Personnel Subcommittee Hearing on Mental Health

WASHINGTON, D.C. – Today, the Armed Services Military Personnel Subcommittee held a hearing to receive an overview on mental health. Witnesses included the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Health Affairs and the surgeons general for the military services. Congressman John M. McHugh (R-NY), Ranking Republican for the subcommittee, released the following opening statement:

“Today’s hearing continues our efforts to assist the Department of Defense (DOD) to improve mental health services that are available to our military personnel and their families. I want to preface my statement by recognizing the tremendous work the Department of Defense and in particular the leaders of the military health system who appear before us today have done to respond to the mental health needs of our service members and their families. I understand that this has not been an easy task and I want to thank you for your efforts in this regard. With that said, clearly there is more work to be done.

“Last year the DOD Mental Health Task Force published its findings that identified significant shortcomings in the Department’s efforts to provide mental health care. Of note, the task force found that the Department of Defense has not invested the resources and funding required to make the necessary services available when and where they are needed.

“Following the report, Secretary Gates publicly committed to fixing the psychological health system stating that he had ‘no intention of waiting’ the full six months allotted by Congress for the development of a corrective action plan. The Secretary tasked DOD to complete a plan to address problems with the military psychological health system within 60 to 90 days.

“While I commend Secretary Gates for sense of urgency in addressing the reported gaps in the system, unfortunately we continue to hear from service members and their families, particularly those who have returned from Iraq and Afghanistan about the difficulty of obtaining timely mental health services. We are told of active duty members having to wait several months between mental health appointments in military treatment facilities and in the TRICARE system. Clearly this calls into question whether the Department has invested the necessary funding and personnel resources. I am anxious to hear from the witnesses if this is the case.

"I also want to hear from our first panel today about how DOD and the military services have addressed the resource shortfalls along with other task force findings such as:

"A pervasive stigma among military personnel about seeking mental health care that keeps them from getting the help they need,

"Gaps in the continuity of psychological health care which is often disrupted during transition among providers, and

"The TRICARE network benefit for psychological health being hindered by fragmented rules and regulations, inadequate oversight and inadequate reimbursement.

"With that said, I would like to again recognize the Army and Lieutenant General Schoomaker for continuing the commitment to assess the mental health system in theater and ensure that it is meeting the needs of the troops. While the Mental Health Advisory Team V findings clearly show positive trends in areas such as increased unit morale and decreased stigma associated with seeking mental health care, there are also some very disturbing findings. Soldiers on their third or fourth tour in Iraq report twice as many mental health problems as first-time deployers. That coupled with the reported increasing difficulty in accessing mental health care again causes me to question whether the right resources in sufficient quantity are in place.

"The report from Afghanistan is equally disturbing, where rates of mental health problems are significantly higher than in 2005 and soldiers are experiencing significant barriers to care. I would like to know how the Army plans to fix these problems.

"In addition, I understand that the MHAT V included information obtained from Marines in theater as well as soldiers. I'm interested in Admiral Robinson's perspective on whether mental health services available to deployed Marines are meeting their needs.

"With that, I would like to welcome our witnesses and thank them for participating in the hearing today. I would particularly like to thank the members of the second panel for their willingness to share their personal stories with us and their service to our nation."

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