



Veterans Mental Health June 2008

Issue: Increasingly, our nation's veterans with serious mental health needs— primarily those returning from combat service in Iraq and Afghanistan – are turning to county mental health departments because they are not receiving timely access to mental health services through the United States Department of Veterans Affairs (USDVA). Even though federal dollars earmarked for mental health treatment for returning veterans from Iraq and Afghanistan have been allocated, much of the money set aside for that treatment has been diverted elsewhere by the USDVA, according to a recent study by the Government Accountability Office (GAO) (GAO-06-1119T).

Background: It is not uncommon for veterans serving in combat to return home with emotional and/or psychological difficulties, which occurred as a result of traumatic impacts of war. From experience we have learned that veterans with untreated mental illness are often at increased risk of lifelong impairments such as substance abuse, unemployment, certain mental illnesses, suicide and homelessness.

Accessing mental health services through the USDVA is challenging—proof must be provided to assess the claimed disability, followed by an assessment to determine how much of the percentage of the disability is combat related. Numerous reports by veterans point to extensive wait times for the assessment process to take place through the USDVA, which hinders access to treatment. Additionally, the USDVA is also incredibly short-staffed and has limited geographic locations where services are provided.

The California Mental Health Directors Association (CMHDA) and individual counties have and will continue to work collaboratively with California veterans groups to address access problems for veterans who are waiting for federal evaluation and determination by the USDVA for mental health services.

In 2005, CMHDA worked with the late Assembly Member Mike Gordon on AB 599 (Chapter 221, Statutes of 2005), a bill that specifically states that California veterans in need of mental health services who are not eligible for care by the USDVA or other federal health care providers, and who meet the existing realignment (W&I Section 5600.3) “target population” eligibility requirements, should be provided services **to the extent resources are available**. The measure also requires counties to refer a veteran to the county veterans’ service officer to determine the veteran’s eligibility for, and the availability of, mental health services provided by the USDVA or other federal health care providers.

In 2006, CMHDA worked with Assembly Member Joe Nation on AB 2844 (Chapter 618, Statutes of 2006), which prohibits county mental health authorities from denying mental health services to veterans based solely on their status as a veteran. In the same year, CMHDA worked with Assembly Member Nicole Parra on AB 2586, which would include

veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan among those eligible for alternative sentencing programs if they allege that the crime committed was the result of post-traumatic stress disorder, substance abuse or psychological problems associated with service related combat. The measure allows the judge to refer such an individual to mental health treatment through the county mental health system, but only to the extent that resources are available and only as long as the services are within the traditional scope of services of county mental health.

County Mental Health Resources

Unfortunately, county mental health authorities do not have anywhere near the financial resources necessary to serve all those in need who meet the eligibility criteria for public mental health services, including those who are veterans. Eroding core mental health funding (Medi-Cal, Realignment revenues) over the past few years has resulted in many counties having to actually reduce already inadequate mental health services.

There have been some recent positive developments, however, that -- over time -- should help increase access to needed mental health services and supports for veterans and their families:

- The Mental Health Services Act (or Prop. 63) has allowed local communities to identify populations who are both unserved and underserved, and to dedicate some of these new resources to addressing their specific needs. Particularly in areas where there is a high concentration of veterans and their families (such as those with military bases), this population has been identified as having a high priority need for funding.
- A new MHSA-funded housing program is expected to create thousands of new supportive housing units over the next few years to address the needs of individuals with serious mental illness who are homeless or are at risk of homelessness, a significant percentage of whom are veterans.
- Counties have committed to funding a Network of Care for Veterans website that will include specific information in each county for how veterans and their families can find local veterans resources – including where they can get mental health care. The Network of Care website (www.networkofcare.org) is currently available for each county with specific information regarding mental health services. The veterans' information is under development and should be available soon.
- CMHDA is working with the California Institute for Mental Health in the development of a new film about veterans mental health needs entitled "A New Kind of Valor." The film, which was just completed, will be used to help train community mental health staff in identifying and dealing with the mental health needs of veterans – particularly those returning from the Iraq and Afghanistan wars – and their families.

CMHDA Position:

Our nation has a responsibility to address the health and mental health needs of its veterans. To accomplish that goal, the federal government should:

- Expedite access for veterans to their rightfully earned U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs benefits.
- Be held accountable for providing adequate funding for health, mental health and substance abuse services for California's veterans.

- Invest significantly more resources in earlier mental health screening and treatment services for veterans with mental illness and substance abuse treatment, as many of these young veterans self-medicate with alcohol or other drugs.
- Allow county and community-based mental health providers to contract with the federal government to provide mental health and substance abuse services to veterans.

At the same time, county mental health departments should:

- Ensure that veterans and their families have the same access to county mental health services as other eligible members of the community, to the extent resources are available.
- Refer veterans to their county veterans' service officer, to assist them in determining eligibility for federal veterans' benefits.
- Continue to work collaboratively with veterans' advocacy groups to help address the growing unmet mental health needs of the veterans in our communities, including advocating together for more state and federal funding.
- Include veterans and veterans' organizations in their local Mental Health Services Act (Prop. 63) community stakeholder processes.

For more information, please contact Patricia Ryan, CMHDA Executive Director, at pryan@cmhda.org.