

Wounded Warrior Project Testifies Before House Veterans Affairs Committee, Urges Implementation of Effective Mental Health Care for Veterans

Washington, D.C. (May 8, 2012) – Wounded Warrior Project™ (WWP), whose mission is to honor and empower wounded warriors, today testified before the House of Representatives Committee on Veterans Affairs to highlight system-wide issues preventing servicemen and women from receiving quality mental health care.

Ralph Ibson, National Policy Director for WWP, discussed shortfalls in VA's mental health system of care that result in the inconsistent and untimely treatment of Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) and Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) veterans who are living with combat-related mental health conditions. Though VA has implemented performance measures to track the time it takes veterans to receive an initial and follow up appointment, Ibson's testimony called into question whether those surface level indicators will actually translate into an understanding of facility level challenges and ultimately ensure veterans are receiving not only timely, but quality care.

"VA faces a real challenge as it relates to the culture at many facilities," Ibson said during his testimony. "There is the perception that VA leadership issues policy directives and sets performance standards without regard to whether facilities' clinical staff actually have the means to carry them out, or whether they are really measures or even reasonable proxies for good care."

Secretary Shinseki's testimony highlighted VA's recent commitment to add 1,900 additional mental health staff in the next six months, and although WWP acknowledges this as a positive step, Shinseki's testimony indicated that VA still lacks an execution plan for the on-boarding of additional staff and an operational model to understand where staff are most needed. WWP remains concerned that, by VA's own characterization, the plans to meet the mental health needs of veterans are "reactionary" and VA had yet to address an immediate action plan for treating veterans who are currently in the system and unable to access timely, quality care.

Today's testimony follows recent oversight hearings from the Senate Veterans Affairs Committee that also explored the mental health services provided by VA. That hearing on April 25 focused prominently on a recent Inspector General report that found both that VA does not have a reliable or accurate method of determining veterans' timely access to mental health care, and additionally lacks reliable data on which to make informed decisions on improving mental health care.

In WWP's view, the barriers that impede OEF/OIF veterans from receiving effective mental health care also make it critical that VA address several broader issues. WWP presented several steps for VA to take towards improving this process:

1. Reach out – to its medical school partners, to organizations representing mental health professionals, to state and local government, to non-profit organizations, to the faith community and other communities. VA must use fee basis authority to employ community-based care options when it cannot provide wounded warriors timely treatment,
2. Ensure better coordination between Vet Centers and VA Medical Centers. Vet Centers need additional staffing, and additional Vet Center sites are needed, and

3. Move beyond reliance on ad hoc work groups (whose members are likely pulled from clinical care), and instead to enlist independent expertise (whether through the Institute of Medicine or independent-expert consultants) for needed help.

“Providing access to appropriate and quality mental health care is a real and dire issue that warrants immediate action,” said Steven Nardizzi, executive director, WWP. “We look forward to working with this Committee to assist in the implementation of operational practices that will result in effective mental health care for wounded warriors.”

For more information, and to view WWP’s 2012 Legislative Policy Agenda please visit the WWP website at <http://www.woundedwarriorproject.org/programs/policy-government-affairs.aspx>.

About Wounded Warrior Project™

The mission of Wounded Warrior Project™ is to honor and empower wounded warriors. WWP’s purpose is to raise awareness and to enlist the public’s aid for the needs of injured service members, to help injured servicemen and women aid and assist each other, and to provide unique, direct programs and service to meet their needs. WWP is a national, nonpartisan organization headquartered in Jacksonville, Florida. To get involved and learn more, visit woundedwarriorproject.org.

<https://newsroom.woundedwarriorproject.org/2012-05-08-Wounded-Warrior-Project-Testifies-Before-House-Veterans-Affairs-Committee-Urges-Implementation-of-Effective-Mental-Health-Care-for-Veterans>