

## Wounded Warrior Project Calls on the Department of Veterans Affairs to Refocus Its Approach to Returning Warriors' Mental Health

### **--More aggressive strategy needed to win this battle--**

Jacksonville, FL (June 22, 2011) – As the nation approaches the ten-year mark of combat operations

in Afghanistan and Iraq, we risk losing the war on mental health for this generation of veterans. Wounded Warrior Project calls on the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to refocus its approach to returning warriors' mental health and to mount a more aggressive strategy to win this critical battle.

The number of veterans from the current conflicts experiencing combat stress continues to climb, with the prospect of a generation of veterans at risk for chronic mental health problems. Post-traumatic stress and other combat-related mental health conditions can be treated. And VA has many excellent mental health clinicians. Yet VA's approach to the challenge is flawed.

According to the VA Office of Public Health and Environmental Hazards report, one out of every two returning veterans does not even enroll with the VA health system. Furthermore, researchers studying utilization of the VA system report significant percentages of those with mental health needs drop out of VA treatment prematurely.

"Seven years have passed since the VA adopted a mental health strategic plan. In that time, we've seen the number of warriors struggling with combat-related stress problems escalate exponentially and seen those problems intensify as many return from second, third and fourth deployments," said Wounded Warrior Project (WWP) Executive Director Steve Nardizzi. "It's time VA reassesses and revises its plan."

"VA is failing to reach many of these warriors, is failing to connect with many it sees, and is inaccessible to many more," he continued. "Wounded Warrior Project calls on VA to confront the flaws in its system, and make fundamental changes."

WWP is pressing VA to close gaps in its mental health system – gaps in outreach, gaps in access, gaps in sustaining warriors in treatment and gaps in family support. Its aim is that VA will go beyond medically managing patients' symptoms -- to helping warriors ultimately thrive.

WWP is calling for sweeping changes in VA including:

- Employing returning veterans who have themselves experienced combat stress to provide both direct one-on-one peer-outreach to veterans who might not otherwise seek treatment and peer-to-peer support to help sustain veterans in treatment;
- Launching education and training programs for clinical staff on military culture and combat to help forge more effective connection with young veterans;
- Providing needed mental health services to family members whose own stress may diminish their capacity to provide emotional support for returning warriors;
- Expanding the number of Vet Center sites, and locating new ones near military facilities;
- Fostering community-reintegration programs to help warriors transition successfully back to civilian life and give our warriors the opportunity to thrive, not just survive; and
- Full implementation of existing VA policy that promises, but has yet to deliver, access to all needed mental health services for all eligible veterans.

### **About Wounded Warrior Project**

The mission of the Wounded Warrior Project® (WWP) 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, FL. To get involved and learn more, visit [woundedwarriorproject.org](http://woundedwarriorproject.org).

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