Wounded Warrior Project's Josh Renschler to Testify Before House VA Committee Hearing on VA Mental Health Care

Mental Health Care Access is Only Half the Equation

Washington, D.C. (July 10, 2014) – Wounded Warrior Project Alumnus Josh Renschler, of Olympia, WA, will testify today before the House Committee on Veterans Affairs on VA's mental health care programs. Renschler, Sergeant U.S. Army (Ret.), will urge that mental health care can and must become a top priority at VA, and that access to mental health care alone will not solve the problems facing injured service men and women: mental health care must also be effective.

"One has to get to the question, 'access to what?'" said Renschler. "Access to a system where I go to three different buildings to see three different providers for health issues that are all related to my mental health – pain, lack of sleep, and relationship issues – is a real problem when those providers aren't working as a team, and aren't even given the time needed to coordinate their observations and treatment approaches with one another. This system of care makes it all too easy to miss those red flags that point to serious mental health crises and even suicides."

Renschler served as a United States Army Infantryman for five and half years before being medically retired following a mortar blast in Iraq in 2004, where he sustained severe back injuries and subsequently developed post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). He says an interdisciplinary VA deployment health team provided excellent care in helping him battle PTSD and anxiety, but those teams have largely been disbanded to contain costs.

Renschler says mental health care must be patient-centered – VA's system must meet the needs of the veteran, not the other way around. Proposals to expand veterans' access to non-VA mental health care provide no "silver bullets" in Renschler's view, given a national shortage of mental health care providers.

According to a recently released report from the Institute of Medicine (IOM) on PTSD treatment at VA and DoD, the acceleration of PTSD among service members and veterans is "staggering," but the treatment system is falling far short of the need. The IOM report found that, while the percentage of patients at the Veterans Health Administration being treated for PTSD has doubled between 2004 and 2012, the VA and DoD are not consistently providing the quality care that would reflect a high-performing PTSD treatment system. The report also found that staffing in both DoD and VA has not kept pace with the demand for PTSD services; in 2012, fewer veterans with PTSD were seen in specialized programs and were seen less frequently than in 2004. And while the scope of the problem has grown substantially, the VA PTSD research budget has remained static over the last 5 years.

"The IOM report is a stark reminder of how much further we have to go to deliver high-quality, veteran-centered mental health care," said Steve Nardizzi, CEO, Wounded Warrior Project. "This report clearly shows that most service members and veterans with PTSD are not receiving effective care, and both VA and DoD do not have a strategic plan to deal with the surging PTSD population and are not adequately measuring outcomes or holding leadership accountable for implementing strategies to manage PTSD effectively."

WWP's 2013 Annual Alumni Survey shows even more staggering numbers: in 2013, 75.4% of WWP alumni reported having experienced PTSD, but only 55.2% of WWP alumni said they had visited a professional to get help. The survey also found that 34.2% of WWP alumni said they had difficulty in getting mental health care, put off getting such care, or did not get the care they needed; reasons reported included inconsistent treatment or lapses in treatment, and feeling uncomfortable with existing resources within the DoD or VA. In fact, only 9.8% of WWP alumni reported they have not had any mental health concerns since deployment.

Wounded Warrior Project has a history of advocating on behalf of wounded veterans and their families to improve access and

quality of VA's mental health care, including our instrumental leadership in the writing and ultimate passage of a caregiver-assistance law, and successful advocacy for VA to employ and train veterans to serve as peer-support specialists on VA mental health treatment teams. WWP has also provided testimony at 16 hearings on mental health issues since 2011. WWP continues to work closely with Congress and VA to propose solutions that serve the best interests of our nation's veterans and caregivers.

The hearing will begin at 9:15 am ET in Room 334 of the Cannon House Office Building and streaming online at veterans.house.gov.

About Wounded Warrior Project®

Wounded Warrior Project is recognizing its ten-year anniversary, reflecting on a decade of service and reaffirming its commitment to serving injured veterans for their lifetime. The mission of Wounded Warrior Project® (WWP) is to honor and empower Wounded Warriors. WWP currently serves 50,000 warriors and nearly 7,000 family members through its unique 20 programs and services. WWP's purpose is to raise awareness and to enlist the public's aid for the needs of injured service members, to help injured service men and women aid and assist each other, and to provide unique, direct programs and services to meet their needs. WWP is a national organization headquartered in Jacksonville, Florida. To get involved and learn more, visit woundedwarriorproject.org.

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