

Wounded Warrior Project Presents 2015 Policy Priorities to Senate, House Veterans Affairs Committees

Priorities Emphasize Future Needs of Today's Wounded, Ill, or Injured Veterans

Washington, D.C. (March 18, 2015) – Wounded Warrior Project® (WWP) today unveiled its 2015 policy priorities during testimony before the Committees on Veterans Affairs for the Senate and the House of Representatives. WWP developed its policy priorities in recognition of the challenges our nation's veterans, their caregivers, and their families face today, and in anticipation of their extended needs for the future.

In testimony during a joint hearing before both committees, Ryan Kules, national alumni director at WWP and a wounded service member himself, applauded bipartisan efforts over the past year that have resulted in the passage of critical legislation, including the Veterans Access to Care Act and the Clay Hunt Suicide Prevention for American Veterans Act. Kules was thankful to the committee members for their dedication to wounded, ill, or injured veterans, their caregivers, and their families, and emphasized that many warriors are still struggling, and at risk of continued problems in the years ahead.

"It is increasingly clear that the least visible wounds among warriors of this generation – including traumatic brain injury and post-traumatic stress disorder – have the most devastating long-term impact. WWP has pledged to support this country's injured warriors for a lifetime, and we ask that you join us in this commitment," testified Kules.

Kules outlined WWP's four policy priorities for 2015 and beyond, comprising mental health, economic empowerment, long-term rehabilitation and caregivers, and TRICARE for injured service members:

Mental Health

- **Access to Mental Health Care:** Improve the access, timeliness, and effectiveness of care for the invisible wounds of war (including post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD); depression; anxiety; traumatic brain injury (TBI); substance use conditions; and chronic pain) through programmatic change – including integrating complementary therapies – continued oversight, and legislation.
- **Mental Health Care for Victims of Military Sexual Trauma (MST):** Expand efforts to prevent MST and ease the evidentiary burden on warriors of establishing serviceincurrence of such trauma.

Economic Empowerment

- **Campus Support:** Authorize and appropriate the funds necessary to establish a Department of Education grant program to help institutions of higher education establish, maintain, and improve veteran student centers – dedicated spaces on college or university campuses that provide student veterans or eligible family members with a meeting space and centralized office for services.
- **Incentivize "Individual Unemployability" (IU):** Remove the barrier to gainful employment facing disabled veterans due to the "individual unemployability" designation. WWP urges the committees to examine the efficacy of this program and to consider options for the IU rating that would give disabled veterans incentives to get back into the workforce and into their communities.

Long-term TBI Rehabilitation and Caregivers

- **The AL-TBI Pilot Program:** Continue to exercise oversight on the Assisted Living TBI (AL-TBI) pilot program and to evaluate its efficacy and impact on injured veterans, their caregivers, and their families. Because the traumatic brain injuries that impair the severely injured veterans served by this program are not healed in three-year increments, WWP asks that the Committees consider making this pilot program and its associated services permanent.
- **Caregivers:** Resolve the long-standing issues with the Caregiver Program and ease the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) reporting and oversight requirements on caregivers who are also fiduciaries for their

loved ones.

- Fertility: WWP urges the Committees to enact legislation that would enable couples who are unable to conceive because of the warrior's severe service-incurred injury or illness to receive fertility counseling and treatment, including assisted reproductive services.

TRICARE for Wounded, Ill or Injured Service Members

- TRICARE: For several years, WWP has asked Congress to revise current law, which subjects the most seriously injured veterans to loss of TRICARE coverage if they opt out of purchasing Medicare supplemental insurance. This restriction must be revised to ensure that catastrophically injured veterans do not continue to fall through the cracks.

WWP's policy priorities were developed with the results of its 2014 Annual Alumni Survey in mind; responses from more than 21,000 injured veterans of this generation documented some of the challenges they face:

- The most commonly experienced injuries and health problems reported were sleep problems (75%); PTSD (75%); back, neck, or shoulder problems (72%); depression (67%); and anxiety (64%).
- More than one-third (35%) of respondents reported difficulty accessing mental health care, put off getting that care, or did not get the care they needed.
- A third of respondents (33.5%) are now enrolled in school. Among those enrolled in school, nearly two-thirds are pursuing a bachelor's degree or higher (65.6%, up from 59.7% in 2013); another 24.2% are pursuing an associate degree (22% in 2013); and 7.3% are enrolled in business, technical, or vocational school training leading to a certificate or diploma (6.4% in 2013).
- Among respondents, 67.3% are in the labor force. About half (50.5%) of WWP warriors are employed full-time, and 7.4% are employed part-time.
- The estimated unemployment rate for all WWP warriors is 13.9%; for non-active-duty WWP warriors, the unemployment rate is 19.7%.

"Wounded Warrior Project envisions a future in which the most successful, well-adjusted generation of wounded service members in our nation's history not only survives, but also thrives," said Kules. "This vision requires sustained public support, and relevant programs and services for veterans and their caregivers. Helping wounded warriors requires a lifetime of commitment, and we are committed to serving this population for their lifetimes, and to working with Congress and the Administration to realize this vision."

WWP is on Capitol Hill today for Brain Injury Awareness Day to encourage lawmakers, healthcare professionals, and the public to consider the questions that warriors with TBIs, their caregivers, and their families face every day. WWP joins the bipartisan Congressional Brain Injury Task Force, composed of more than 80 members, to further education and awareness of brain injury—including its incidence, prevalence, prevention, and treatment. The needs of veterans living with cognitive and physical challenges due to a brain injury reach far beyond what VA programs can address. Injured veterans, caregivers, and families need to know that long-term health problems have long-term solutions.

The full testimony can be found at <http://www.veterans.senate.gov/>.

The mission of 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 services 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/2015-03-08-Wounded-Warrior-Project-Presents-2015-Policy-Priorities-to-Senate-House-Veterans-Affairs-Committees>

