

The war at home: veteran's mental health care

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With the war over in Iraq and the war in Afghanistan coming to a close there are over 2, 300, 000 veterans that have served in the War on Terror.

(Martinez. Bingham) Many of these veterans would not have survived without recent advances in medicine. With that being said, their wounds are much more difficult and expensive to treat than any other previous generation of veterans. The Department of Veterans Affairs estimates that the cost for providing medical care and disability for returning veterans is between \$589 billion and \$984 billion. (Lifetime Cost of Treating Latest Generation of Veterans Higher than Predicted) Over 300, 000 of Iraq and Afghanistan veterans suffer from psychological wounds such as Post-traumatic Stress Disorder or traumatic brain injury. (Tanielian. Jaycox.) The Department of Veterans Affairs is responsible for treating these brave men and women and their host of complex issues after they return home from deployment. Since the beginning of the Iraq war, suicides in the military have become a major issue. According to a study done by the Huffington Post, one veteran commits suicide every 65 minutes, this adds up to 22 lives a day. The number of service members who took their own lives last year outnumbered the amount of combat related deaths. (Military Suicides: One U. S. Veteran Dies Every 65 Minutes) Coming home from a deployment can be extremely stressful for service members and their families. Often service members must learn to cope with the very disturbing and traumatic incidents they have seen while on duty. These can range from battlefield injuries to the loss of very close comrades in the field. Not only must the veteran learn to cope with the traumatic and unsettling events that have happened overseas, they must also learn how to reintegrate back into the

civilian lifestyle. This integration can be very difficult for some veterans. Many veterans feel that the lack of readily available mental health care from the Department of Veterans Affairs has been a major result of the high suicide rates that are seen within the veteran population. The Department of Veterans Affairs has responded to the alarming rate of suicides by investing in 24 hour hotlines for veterans that are in danger of taking their own lives. Live trained professionals are always available for counseling. The veteran crisis hotline has been responsible for over 745, 000 calls since it was created in 2007. (About the Veteran Crisis Line) Even with this progress, many veterans feel it is not enough. Many of these hotlines are considered by veterans and their family members to be a very quick fix to a much bigger issue. The Department of Veterans Affairs serves easily over a thousand veterans and their family members. They have numerous different services ranging from physical therapy, surgery, and mental health. They hire a team a very dedicated staff many of whom have been in the military themselves. However, the Veterans Affairs is facing an immense bureaucratic mess when dealing with the new population of veterans coming home from both the Iraq and Afghanistan wars. Many veterans with severe psychological health problems are extremely frustrated with the Veterans Affairs lack of open appointments. Many have complained they have yet to receive their screening let alone an actual appointment. The Department of Veterans Affairs claims that it takes every patient very seriously and tries to see each patient for a mental health screening within the maximum wait time of two weeks. (Scotti) Despite this report, the Veterans Affairs inspector general found that employees responsible for making appointments often

entered misleading information into their computer system. Some employees were recording the next free appointment date as the patient's choice of the appointment date. This resulted in veterans that had been waiting for several weeks to be seen to show up in the VA's computer system as having no wait time leaving many veterans without their promised appointments. Many veterans have waited for months or more just to get evaluated for their severe mental health problems. This has created a huge issue for veterans facing serious psychological problems that need help immediately, many have ended up taking their own lives. The Veterans Affairs has responded to the frustrating and long process of waiting for appointments by hiring ten percent more staff to help decrease the delay of scheduling appointments. Not only is the Veterans Affairs increasing its staff by ten percent it is also focusing more heavily on its oversight of employees who schedule appointments and more direct training of such employees. (Bedell) The Veterans Affairs claims that it will start measuring new patient's appointments by keeping track of the time when the appointment was recorded into the medical system and when the actual appointment was finished. For secure patients the Veterans Affairs will measure the appointment wait time by the patient's desired date of appointment to a future scheduled date. Finally for being criticized publically by the Government Accountability Office that senior executive employees were skewing the appointments dates in order to receive higher bonuses, the Veterans Affairs has cancelled more than half of the bonuses targeted towards senior executives. (Jordan) Due to the recession and lack of government funding the Veterans Affairs is having a lot of trouble in

diagnosing veterans with the accurate psychological diagnosis. The most common misdiagnosed disorder that veterans face today is Post-traumatic stress disorder. Post-traumatic stress disorder occurs after a person has been exposed to any life threatening event. Patients re-experience their trauma through flashbacks of the event, nightmares, and triggers like sudden noises, smells, or tastes that remind them of that particular event. Many veterans feel they are being misdiagnosed by the Veterans Affairs so they do not have to pay them their entitled benefits. Often veterans have been diagnosed with Adjustment disorder, which is only present in individuals who have been through a non-life threatening event and who do not re-experience their trauma. A number of veterans who used to receive compensation for Post-traumatic stress disorder through the VA are now having their diagnoses reinstated. One Army veteran, Daniel Hibbard, talks about the difficulties he faces in having his Post-traumatic stress disorder diagnosis from the VA changed to another diagnosis. Hibbard was diagnosed by the VA twice for Post-traumatic stress disorder. He received a letter in the mail stating that his medical diagnosis had been revised and changed to a personality disorder. Daniel states "" It makes me feel like I'm being called a fraud, a fake." " You might as well and go ahead and burn my record and say I was never in the military. " He is currently fighting the VA over the misdiagnosis and hopes to continue to receive mental health care. (Ruiz) The Department of Veterans Affairs realizes that doctors misdiagnosing patients is an issue in the department. Josh Taylor, a spokesman of the Department of Veterans Affairs told msnbc. com in a statement. " When any change in an evaluation is to be made, particularly where a mental disorder is involved,

the VA strives to reconcile the evidence and continue the previous diagnosis. Only where the prior diagnosis is shown to be clearly erroneous, will VA make a correction. " Taylor also stated that " In the year 2010 the Veterans Affairs simplified its PTSD diagnosis process and relaxed its standards for proving service-related PTSD. " " Since then, more veterans have been awarded PTSD-related mental health care and disability benefits. " " Of the 476, 515 veterans who were receiving mental health services for PTSD in 2011, about 100, 000 served in Iraq or Afghanistan, a 35 percent increase since 2008. " (Ruiz) The Department of Veterans Affairs is currently going through 860, 000 medical claims from veterans, more than a quarter of those veterans have been waiting for a year or more. (Bronstein. Kaye.) The VA has been ridiculed for its unorganized system in filing medical claims and making appointments. Often veterans have been misdiagnosed resulting in the wrong compensation based on their medical claims. This is a huge struggle for America's disabled veterans as well as their family members. Many veterans cannot work because of their level of disability but are still waiting on compensation from the Veterans Affairs, which leaves them in a very vulnerable state. On average most veterans wait around 8 months for one of their claims to be processed by the VA. (Bronstein. Kaye.) Mike Grabski, a ten year army veteran waited more than two years for his claim to be completely processed. Grabski says, " It wasn't just the stress of not having the compensation, it was the stress of 'Is this going to happen?' or 'When is this going to happen?' or 'How is this going to happen?' or 'What's the next speed bump going to be?' "(Bronstein. Kaye.) The Veterans Affairs administration says that one of the major issues in the massive backlog of

medical claims is the paper based system that they run on. In order to analyze and compensate a veteran's claim they must go through a very thorough and slow process of scanning and securing the claim and financial documents. The Veterans Affairs assistant secretary for public intergovernmental affairs, Tommy Sowers states " Many veterans are returning with severe and complex mental injuries. These veterans file multiple claims, far more than ever before and sometimes they file incomplete paperwork. "(Sowers) Another reason why there is such a backlog of veteran's medical claims is because of the lack of funding through the government and the economic recession. The Veterans Affairs states that last year alone it paid nearly \$5 billion dollars to Agent Orange victims and victims of Gulf War Syndrome which resulted in a lack of overall funds. (Bronstein. Kaye.) There are obvious flaws within the Department of Veterans Affairs that need to be addressed in order for America's veterans and their family members to have adequate psychological health care. The Veterans Affairs unorganized and outdated paper based system clearly needs to be addressed. Returning veterans in need of immediate assistance should not have to wait for financial support nor should they have to wait for immediate psychological care. The lack of professionally trained staff available for scheduling appointments puts veterans and their family members greatly at risk. There should be little to no wait time for veterans with severe psychological issues. Misdiagnosing veterans with psychological disorders that do not fit their symptoms and clearly do not pertain to any stint of military service is completely unacceptable and needs to be addressed. Without the necessary government funding for veterans and their

family members the Department of Veterans Affairs is having a very hard time addressing these major issues within its department. More financial attention and highly concerned government officials must be sought in order for the Veterans Affairs administration to have a fully functioning and highly professional system that only benefits veterans and their family members.

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