

ISSUE BRIEF: VA MENTAL HEALTH CARE

The Situation

- Since 2001, more than 2.7 million service members have deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan, with many serving multiple deployments. More than 1.9 million are now veterans, and nearly 1.2 million have obtained VA health care services. In fiscal year 2015, more than 58.1 percent of OEF, OIF, and OND veterans had a mental health diagnosis (including post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depressive disorders, and alcohol and drug dependence).
- Between 2005 and 2014, the number of veterans who received mental health care from VA grew by 71 percent. This rate of increase is more than three times that seen in the overall number of VA users. Likewise, the number of mental health encounters or treatment visits increased from 10.5 million in 2005 to 19.6 million in 2014—an 87 percent increase.

The Challenge

- VA is responsible for treating a large population of veterans diagnosed with mental health conditions. Less serious disorders are treated in an integrated primary care setting; more intensive care management is provided for veterans with serious or chronic mental illness and veterans at high risk for suicide. VA also provides specialized care to war veterans with post-deployment mental health issues such as co-occurring substance use disorders and PTSD.
- The continued growth in the number of veterans seeking mental health treatment in VA has posed challenges in timely access to care, and providing long-term treatment for more serious mental health conditions.
- Despite VA's aggressive action to recruit, hire and retain mental health professionals, it struggles to provide timely high quality mental health care services at all VA facilities.

The Solution

- Experts note that timely care and early intervention can improve veterans' quality of life, prevent chronic illness and suicide, promote recovery, and minimize the long-term disabling effects of chronic mental health problems.
- DAV urges Congress to ensure ample resources are available for VA's specialized mental health programs including Vet Centers, peer to peer services, and evidence-based treatments for PTSD and specialty SUD services.
- VA must provide timely access for veterans seeking primary mental health care and specialized readjustment services, emphasizing early intervention and routine screening for all post-deployed veterans as a critical building block to an effective suicide prevention effort.
- Congress must ensure VA has the resources to attract, recruit and maintain qualified mental health care providers.
- DOD and VA must improve coordination of care for service members transitioning from the military to VA who need mental health service.