



ISSUE BRIEF: VA MENTAL HEALTH CARE

The Situation

- VA is responsible for treating a large population of veterans diagnosed with mental health conditions. Between 2005 and 2017, the number of veterans who received mental health care from VA grew by 86 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 14.7 million in 2017—a 40 percent increase. Users are also more reliant upon VA mental health—in 2005, 19% of users received mental health care services compared to 28% in 2017.
- According to VA, in 2017, about 15% of all VA patients (about 1.2 million) had deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan, with many serving multiple deployments. Of this population 58.1 percent or 708,062 had a possible mental health diagnosis, including post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depressive disorders, and alcohol and drug dependence. This finding does not account for veterans seen at a VA Vet Center.

The Challenge

- The steady increase in the number of veterans seeking mental health treatment has posed challenges for VA in providing timely access to mental health care including access to long-term treatment for more serious mental health conditions and war-related post-deployment mental health challenges.
- Less serious mental health disorders such as mild depression and anxiety are treated in an integrated primary care setting in VA with more intensive care management provided for veterans with serious or chronic mental illness and veterans at high risk for suicide. However, reducing suicide among veterans remains a particularly vexing problem for VA. While the veteran's health administration has developed a number of targeted initiatives, programs and services to prevent veteran suicide—suicide rates among this population have remained relatively unchanged for the past several years.
- Despite VA's aggressive action to recruit, hire and retain mental health professionals, it struggles to maintain a sufficient number of mental health clinicians to provide timely high quality mental health care services at all VA facilities.

The Solution

- VA must provide timely access for wartime 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.
- DAV urges Congress to ensure ample resources are available for VA's specialized mental health programs including Vet Centers, peer specialist services, and evidence-based treatments for PTSD and specialty substance use disorder services.
- Congress must ensure VA has the resources to attract, recruit and maintain a sufficient number of qualified mental health care providers to meet demand for services.
- DOD and VA must improve care coordination for service members transitioning from the military to VA who need mental health services and specialized services for the aftermath of wartime trauma and military sexual assault.