

KANSAS MENTAL HEALTH COALITION

.....*Speaking with one voice to meet the critical needs of people with mental illness*

Mental Health Needs of Returning Veterans and Families

Position: The Kansas Legislature should ensure that Service Members, Veterans and Families are aware of and have access to adequately funded behavioral health treatment in their local communities for post traumatic stress and other behavioral health issues.

The Problem: Our returning and retired veterans are dealing with injuries that are not visible but are very real--mental health, substance abuse, traumatic brain injury, and post traumatic stress (PTSD). These invisible injuries impact veterans, their families, children, employers and communities. Service Members may not know where or how to access treatment and care in their local communities.

Why this matters: More than 26% of returning soldiers from Iraq and Afghanistan have reported mental health and behavioral disorders. The suicide rate among Army soldiers, active, reserve and National Guard, was nearly double the national rate in 2012. Female veterans have also experienced sexual trauma at the rate of 23-33%, and the suicide rate for female veterans is triple that of non-veteran females.

More than 1 in 5 returning veterans is dealing with Post Traumatic Stress, Depression, Substance Abuse or thoughts of suicide or harm to others. The suicide rate for veterans is nearly double the national rate.

Veterans who served overseas may not know that the Veterans Administration (VA) will treat them for up to 5 years after any injury/incident took place. However, the VA only has clinics or services in 22 of 105 Kansas counties. If the soldier lives several hours away from a VA outpatient clinic, they may not be able to access needed professional help. Any service member can present at a Community Mental Health Center or call any time day or night, regardless of their ability to pay. If the VA would contract with local community mental health providers in the 83 counties in which the VA has no physical health care presence, the CMHC network would provide adequate access to services for veterans who may suffer from Post Traumatic Stress, Depression, Substance Abuse or thoughts of suicide.

The bottom line: Our nation owes it to our service members and veterans to treat their wounds of war, including mental health and substance abuse. The Coalition encourages the VA to contract with local community mental health providers to serve those veterans who are not able to seek treatment at the VA centers because of the distance they would have to travel.

Need more information? Drill deeper into this issue on the back of this page.

The rest of the story about the mental health needs of returning veterans and their families.

The thousands of Veterans who deploy and return to their home towns in Kansas live in every county and every community. Kansas' overall population has between 8-9% veterans and service members. They reside in all regions of the state, but many have no access to VA services because of their rural, remote locations—since the VA has very limited physical locations in the state. Service members may not know that the VA will treat the veteran for up to 5 years after the injury/incident took place, but if they live 2-5 hours away from a VA outpatient clinic, they may never be able to receive professional help.

Any service member can present at a Community Mental Health Center or call any time of the day or night. By statute they are mandated to serve any Kansan who presents regardless of their ability to pay. If the VA would contract with local community mental health providers, that network would provide adequate access to services for veterans who may suffer from Post Traumatic Stress, Depression, Substance Abuse or thoughts of suicide.

Community based treatment and care for our veterans is the answer to these pressing mental health issues—for the veterans, their families, and children who may struggle with reintegration into civilian life.

Similarly, it is important for mental health professionals to have military-specific training, particularly in the community mental health health system, to gain some basic information on interaction with military members, families, and children. Such training is available for free in several venues.

Legislative Call to Action

- The Coalition will collaborate with the Kansas Commission on Veterans Affairs to include information in their benefit briefings and handouts on where veterans and families can turn for help with mental health, substance abuse or suicide prevention issues.
- Resolve Congress to urge the VA in Kansas to contract with local behavioral health providers, like community mental health centers, in the areas of the state where the VA does not have a physical health care presence.
- Recommend implementation of a computer network that can connect information on all the services, supports, resources that are available to service members, veterans and families. An internet system such as the NETWORK OF CARE has been developed to serve that exact purpose. Check out <http://networkofcare.org/veterans.cfm> which several states' Adjutant Generals offices have implemented with great success.
- Support creation of veteran's treatment court(s) in Kansas to help those veterans who may have Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI), substance abuse or other behavioral health care situation that has put them in connection with the judicial system in Kansas. Treatment courts allow veterans who follow through with treatment to be diverted from incarceration.