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# United States Senate

SPECIAL COMMITTEE ON AGING

WASHINGTON, DC 20510-6400

(202) 224-5364

March 27, 2007

The Honorable Robert Dole  
Alston & Bird LLP  
The Atlantic Building  
950 F Street N.W.  
Washington, DC 20004-1404 USA

The Honorable Donna Shalala  
President  
Miami University  
PO Box 248006  
Coral Gables, FL 33124

Dear Senator Dole and Secretary Shalala:

I commend you for agreeing to lead President Bush's newly appointed Commission on Care for America's Returning Wounded Warriors. The importance of your service on behalf of America's wounded veterans cannot be understated.

The mental health issues affecting our troops and veterans deployed during Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) and Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF), including active duty, reserves and members of our National Guard, can be as life-threatening as any physical illness. However, mental health issues do not receive the attention they deserve. I am writing to ask that the Commission provide the same focus on the mental health capacity of our veterans' health care system as the physical aspects. Specifically, I ask that your review consider:

- Waiting lists for mental health services;
- Coordination of mental health services and between health care providers;
- Standards of practice and care;
- Quality of mental health screenings;
- Availability of referrals to mental health professionals;
- Limitations on clinic hours;
- Access to care for guard and reserve members;
- Capacity of the health care system to meet the needs of veterans experiencing comorbid traumatic brain injury, or other physical injuries, and psychiatric disorders;
- Maintenance of service to veterans of prior military service beyond the current conflicts;
- Involvement of family in care decisions and the need for, and availability of, mental health services for members of the immediate family of veterans; and

- Training and VA employment of OIF/OEF veterans to serve as outreach workers and peer counselors.

According to a recent report by the American Psychological Association, as many as 30 percent of all our servicemen and women met the criteria for a mental disorder, many of whom suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) due to combat duties in Iraq and Afghanistan. This report also found that less than half of those with mental health issues sought help, supporting the notion that there is a stigma associated with mental health problems in the U.S. military. A greater effort must be placed on reducing this stigma and encouraging those who need it to seek care.

While I applaud the Pentagon for the mental health screenings provided to approximately one million troops prior to and post-deployment, the effectiveness of the screenings is limited unless follow-up care is made available. We must work to ensure that our troops receive appropriate care, both physically and mentally.

Again, I ask that you ensure the mental health needs of our troops are made a top priority of the Commission. Thank you in advance for your consideration.

Warm Regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "G. H. Smith", written in a cursive style.

Gordon H. Smith  
United States Senate