The American Legion

For God and Country

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National Veterans Affairs and Rehabilitation Commission
1608 K Street, N.W. • Washington, D.C. 20006
K. Robert Lewis, Chairman - Connecticut
Peter S. Gaytan, Director - Maryland

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STATEMENT OF
JOSEPH L. WILSON, DEPUTY DIRECTOR
VETERANS AFFAIRS AND REHABILITATION COMMISSION
THE AMERICAN LEGION
BEFORE THE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON HEALTH
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
ON H.R. 784, QUARTERLY REPORTS ON VACANCIES IN MENTAL HEALTH PROFESSIONAL POSITIONS; H.R. 785, PILOT PROGRAM ON OUTREACH AND TRAINING RELATING TO MENTAL HEALTH OF VETERANS OF OPERATION IRAQI FREEDOM AND OPERATION ENDURING FREEDOM

MARCH 3, 2009

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

Thank you for the opportunity to present The American Legion's views on these two important pieces of legislation.

H.R. 784, Quarterly Reports on Vacancies in Mental Health Professional Positions

H.R. 784 seeks to improve the recruitment of mental health care professionals by having the Secretary of Veterans Affairs submit quarterly reports on mental health employment vacancies at VA Medical Centers nationwide.

Section (a) requires the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to submit to Congress a report describing any vacancy in a mental health professional position at any medical facility of the Department, no later than 30 days after the last day of a fiscal quarter. Within these reports, the Secretary is to indicate, for each vacancy, the Veterans Integrated Service Network (VISN) to which the facility with the vacancy is assigned.

The American Legion's "System Worth Saving" Task Force visits medical facilities around the country and reports a constant need for additional mental health providers in almost every Medical Facility. As VA continues to screen, identify, and treat veterans suffering from mental health disorders through VA outreach coordinators and Vet Center's Global War on Terror Counselors, having the staffing capabilities to treat veterans after initial intervention is paramount. Resolution 150, "The American Legion Policy on Department of Veterans Affairs Mental Health Services," states that VA now has more mental health patients seeking treatment with fewer mental health providers." The American Legion believes that with a quarterly report, mental health care services for veterans will be more widely available because less time for recruitment will be needed.

The American Legion supports any standard(s) that improve the mental health capabilities of VA and its medical facilities, and in turn would like to see the passage of H.R. 784. To provide our veterans with the most adequate mental health care, there needs to be the proper amount of mental health providers in the VA Medical Centers. The inadequacy of mental health providers gives way to substandard care and the possibility that veteran mental health care needs will fall through the cracks.

H.R. 785, Pilot Program on Outreach and Training Relating to Mental Health of Veterans of Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom

This bill establishes a pilot program to provide outreach and training to certain college and university mental health centers relating to the mental health of veterans of Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) and Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF), and for other purposes.

Section 1 (a) seeks to establish a four-year program under which the Secretary shall provide a counseling center, student health or wellness center at a college or university with a large veteran population to increase outreach efforts.

Resolution 150, "The American Legion Policy on Department of Veterans Affairs Mental Health Services," states that veterans continue to need increased access to mental health care. A RAND Study on the „Invisible Wounds of War: Addressing the Mental Health Needs of Returning Soldiers' in 2008 estimated that 300,000 veterans, or 18.5 percent of those deployed, were diagnosed by VA with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder or major depression. This number continues to rise and efforts to increase access and quality of care at the universities and colleges are imperative to ensure assistance is available to these veterans during a time of crisis. Additionally, training is needed to ensure college and university staff is prepared in the case of a veteran's mental health crisis. Moreover, The American Legion supports the increased outreach efforts at universities or colleges where many veteran students are not familiar with VA benefits and services.

Mr. Chairman and members of the Subcommittee, The American Legion sincerely appreciates the opportunity to submit testimony and looks forward to working with you and your colleagues on the abovementioned matters. Thank you.