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## Legislation would help some returning veterans

Coda • GREG BEAN

This Fourth of July was certainly a bittersweet holiday in our home. Those who know me know that our son Coleman, an Army sergeant who served two tours in Iraq, took his own life last September.



In the months since, our family has learned a lot about the problems faced by returning vets, and the difficulties they sometimes have finding and obtaining services like psychological and career counseling.

We don't know that better availability of services would have changed our own personal outcome, and we will never know. But we did make a decision to do whatever is in our power to make a difference for some other soldiers and those soldiers' families.

As part of that effort, I reached out to U.S. Rep. Rush Holt this spring and I found him to be a truly caring man. And at the end of one of our conversations, he told me that he would begin working on legislation to address some of the problems, and he put me in touch with Patrick Eddington, his Senior Policy Advisor for Defense and Intelligence Issues. I spoke with Patrick Eddington at some length, and he assured me of the congressman's commitment to the issue and his determination to do something meaningful.

That conversation was several months ago, and I don't know that I believed anything would ever come of it. So I was overjoyed last week when Rep. Holt called me to tell me that an amendment he had proposed had passed the House and has a good shot at becoming law. First, however, it must pass a conference committee with the Senate, but there's great optimism the amendment will survive intact.

The amendment to H.R. 2647 would require the Secretary of Defense to call returning Individual Ready Reserve veterans once every 90 days to determine the emotional, psychological, medical and career needs of the veterans. It would also require any IRR veteran identified as being at risk of self-caused harm to be referred to the nearest military medical treatment facility or accredited TRICARE provider for immediate evaluation and treatment by a qualified mental health care provider.

This is important because it is our Individual Ready Reserve veterans, like our son, who often fall through the cracks.

It's a complicated issue, but when young men and women join the military, they generally serve their initial four-year contracts and they are provided a range of counseling and information about services before they are allowed to muster out.

But many of those soldiers have also signed additional four-year commitments with the Individual Ready Reserve, which means that they can be called back to active duty any time during that four-year period. And if they are called back, they can be assigned anywhere the military has a need.

When our son was called back in 2007, he was assigned to a unit of the Maryland National Guard, and served his second tour with them. When they came home, however, the Maryland soldiers had all the services and help their base provided. The Individual Ready Reserve soldiers went back to their home states — New Jersey in our son's case — and were, and still are, basically left to their own devices.

□ As anyone who has ever dealt with a government bureaucracy knows, it can be a difficult, if not impossible road to travel alone. These soldiers need help, they need advocates and they need someone contacting them on a regular basis to see how they're doing and what can be done to make their transition back to civilian life successful.

Holt's bill will go a long way in making that happen for IRR veterans — and for that he has my personal thanks and gratitude.

I'm also watching the progress of Sen. Max Baucus' legislation that would require multiple person-to-person screenings for all service members before and after serving in combat.

And I'm looking forward to October, when the national organization Give an Hour will host National Day of Awakening in New York and other locations across the country to highlight the mental health needs of military families and the services available to them.

As Barbara Van Dahlen Romberg, the founder and president of Give an Hour, explains, the organization provides free mental health services to redeployed troops and is dedicated to the cause of educating Americans about the issues affecting our returning warriors and getting the word out to veterans that services are available outside traditional channels like the Veterans Administration.

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"The National Day of Awakening will be a call to action for all citizens to assist the 1.9 million Americans who have served in Iraq and Afghanistan and the estimated 20 million directly affected by a loved one's service," Romberg said.

I don't have a list of activities and speakers who will be at the event yet, but I'll let you know more when I do. Maybe I'll see you there.

In the meantime, if you are a veteran, the family member of a veteran, or someone who knows a veteran who is struggling, please also know that there are many fine organizations out there that can help, many of them for no charge.

Give an Hour is one. The Soldiers Project is another. Vets4Vets is yet another. If you need, I can provide contact numbers for these groups and will be happy to do so.

One of the biggest challenges faced by all of them, however, is bringing those who might need help together with those who can provide it. Rolando J. Diaz, a clinical psychologist who works with Give an Hour, explained that problem when he said, "So much of the work of this organization is about creating awareness, not only among providers but also service members — knowing that they can get these services free of charge and that they do not have to feel bad about asking for help."

The rates of suicide among veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan are simply staggering and unacceptable. It looks like the tide is turning, though, and some progress is being made toward a solution.

As I said, it was a bittersweet holiday.

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