



## House passes military mental-health bill

**MARTIN J. KIDSTON Independent Record | Posted: Thursday, October 8, 2009 11:15 pm**

HELENA - Legislation sponsored by Rep. Denny Rehberg requiring troops to undergo face-to-face mental-health screenings before deploying to war zones passed the House of Representatives on Thursday.

Rehberg, a Republican, introduced the Post-Deployment Health Assessment Act in April with the help of Rep. Mike Thompson, D-Calif.

The bill, which now goes to the U.S. Senate, would require troops to undergo mental-health screenings before deploying to war.

As written, veterans would also be required to sit for a similar screening upon their return from combat, and for every six months for the following two years.

"The psychological toll of warfare can be every bit as debilitating as a piece of shrapnel or an enemy bullet," Rehberg said Thursday in a press release.

Earlier this year, Rehberg said a stronger effort was needed to identify soldiers who suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder.

Rehberg said modern medicine can identify and help treat PTSD, allowing veterans to more easily transition back to civilian life and reduce the number of suicides by military veterans.

On Thursday, after the House passed the bill, Rehberg gave credit to the Montana National Guard, which just last year became one of the first in the country to implement a program requiring soldiers to undergo frequent mental-health screenings upon returning from deployment.

Spearheaded by Brig. Gen. Randy Mosley, the adjutant general at the time, the state program began after the suicide of a Helena soldier. The effort was recognized shortly after in Washington where Rehberg and Sen. Max Baucus introduced similar bills in both the House and the Senate.

"This effective solution came from a Montana pilot program, and was championed by Montanans in the House and Senate," Rehberg said. "Sen. Baucus deserves a lot of credit for adding this important language to the Defense Authorization Act, and I'm glad I was able to get it through the House."

Passage of the bill was pleasing news to Matt Kuntz, the executive director of the National Alliance on Mental Illness.

Kuntz helped push the Montana National Guard to examine and ultimately change its own post-deployment efforts by requiring mandatory mental-health screenings for state soldiers.

"The mental-health screenings required under this act are going to help thousands of our men and women in uniform get help for their PTSD injuries," Kuntz said. "That care will save our heroes' lives and help strengthen our military families."

The bill creates new requirements that advocates say will help identify mental health issues early on, including PTSD and depression among military veterans.

Prior to deployment, a soldier or Marine would be interviewed to establish a baseline against which a follow-up interview can be based. Conducting interviews in a timely and personal way will increase the likelihood of identifying PTSD and prescribing treatment.

The Defense Authorization Act, in which the bill was included, also provides a 3.4 percent pay raise for military personnel and increases subsistence allowance to low-income service members with spouses from \$500 to \$1,100.