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Thanks to new law, mental wounds of battle now get treatment, too

In the past month, for the first time, active duty military personnel have had access to the same level of mental health care available to veterans.

A timely law — signed by President Barack Obama this month — allows the disturbingly large number of active-duty personnel returning from our wars to seek help off base and away from their units for “invisible injuries” — posttraumatic stress disorder and traumatic brain injury.

The hope is that the law will allow those who risked life and suffered injury for their country to continue military careers. The care can make the injured whole and help them avoid the damaging stigma that many fear is attached to those who seek counseling in active duty centers. Too often, service personnel believed they were being diagnosed and being discharged with personality disorders, or labeled as troublemakers, because of war injuries.

An estimated 620,000 troops have returned from combat zones with problems. With troops being asked to serve longer and more frequent deployments, this suffering has to be addressed.

Credit Sen. Kit Bond, a Missouri Republican, who co-wrote the original bill and has been pushing for it since 2007. Bond’s effort is a sign that bipartisanship is not dead in Congress. His partner in this effort was Rep. Barbara Boxer, a California Democrat.

Both agreed that the Pentagon’s response to the psychological suffering of troops has been inadequate, as the military was both underfunded and under pressure to replace service members who are no longer combat-ready. As Bond rightly noted, that attitude missed a crucial point: “The very least we can do is take care of their battle wounds — whether physical or mental.”