

Mental health treatment for military family members has grown 15 percent annually since 2001

By **Bob Brewin** 03/01/11

Visits by family members of active-duty military personnel to mental health professionals have increased at a compound annual growth rate of 15 percent since 2001, the Military Health System disclosed in a report to members of the Senate Armed Services Committee on Feb. 1.

The **report**, sent to the committee by Jonathan Woodson, assistant secretary of Defense for health affairs, said demand for behavioral health services has increased due to the eligible number of beneficiaries and "the stresses of repeated deployments."

The mental health impact on families of multiple deployments mirrors the effects those deployments have on the troops. The Army **reported** in a July 2009 survey that troops deployed to Iraq on their third or fourth tour had lower morale and more mental health problems.

According to the survey, soldiers in combat units said deployment had a direct effect on family life -- 16.5 percent faced divorce or separation. The Army found that the possibility of divorce has steadily increased since 2003, when the service began conducting formal mental health assessments of troops stationed in Afghanistan and Iraq.

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Alan Peterson, a retired Air Force psychologist who is now a professor at the University of Texas Health Science Center in San Antonio, said the increase in mental health consultations that military family members seek reflects the cumulative effects of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

The good news in these statistics, Peterson said, is they also might reflect that family members have overcome the stigma often associated with seeking mental health care.

The report that MHS sent to the Senate this month did not quantify how many family members have sought mental health care since 2001.

But it showed that the number of mental health care providers in the TRICARE insurance plan had increased by slightly more than 22 percent, or by 10,220 providers from 39,587 in 2007 to 49,807 in 2009. The number of behavioral health specialists working in military hospitals jumped 32 percent, or 1,932 from 4,129 in 2007 to 6,061 in 2009, the report said.

TRICARE also provides a number of mental health resources online and by telephone, the report said, including a behavioral health information line, a provider locator line, a Web-based program that connects family members to counselors, and a telemental health program that uses secure videoconferencing technology for electronic face-to-face sessions with practitioners.

The report said MHS has funded an additional 1,700 mental health provider positions during the past two years and has partnered with the Public Health Service to increase the number of clinicians serving military patients by 200.

Streamlined hiring practices for civilian mental health personnel, including compensation incentives and direct-hire

authority, has made MHS much more competitive, the report said. As a result the Defense Department "has been able to increase recruitment and hiring of many behavioral health care positions."

MHS said it plans to use incentive pay for mental health professionals, which officials believe will have a "significant effect" on their ability to recruit and retain mental health professionals.

The Army plans to add 1,083 mental health professionals over the next five years, while the Navy expects to add 197 through 2012 and the Air Force expects to add 239 through 2016, the report said.

All the services have assessed the supply and demand for mental health care and have developed staffing plans to meet the needs, the report concluded.

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