



**CONSORTIUM FOR CITIZENS  
WITH DISABILITIES**

April 5, 2012

Dr. Mary Schohn, PhD  
Director of Mental Health Operations  
Veterans Health Administration  
Department of Veterans Affairs  
810 Vermont Ave, NW  
Washington, DC 20420

Dr. Sonja Batten, PhD  
Deputy Chief Consultant for Specialty Mental  
Health  
Veterans Health Administration  
Department of Veterans Affairs  
810 Vermont Ave, NW  
Washington, DC 20420

Dr. Antonette Zeiss, PhD  
Chief Consultant for Mental Health  
Veterans Health Administration  
Department of Veterans Affairs  
810 Vermont Ave, NW  
Washington, DC 20420

Dear Dr. Schohn, Dr. Zeiss, and Dr. Batten:

The undersigned members of the Consortium for Citizens with Disabilities (CCD) Veterans and Military Families Task Force and the Mental Health Liaison Group (MHLG) are writing in regard to access to mental health services through the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA).

CCD is a coalition of over 100 national consumer, service provider, and professional organizations which advocates on behalf of people with disabilities and chronic conditions and their families.

The MHLG is a coalition comprised of national behavioral health organizations, representing consumers, family members, advocates, professionals, and providers which advocates on behalf of individuals with, or at risk of, a mental health or substance use condition, including service members, veterans, and their families.

According to the most recent report from the Government Accountability Office (GAO), between fiscal years 2006 and 2010, over 2 million individual veterans received mental health services from VA. Although veterans of Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom represented 12 percent of the total number of veterans who received mental health care from VA, the overwhelming majority of veterans receiving care served in earlier eras. The continuing mental health needs of veterans from earlier periods of service such as Vietnam illustrates the long-term need of veterans to receive high quality and sustained mental health services.

GAO reported that in an effort to address the needs of these veterans, VA's mental health staffing has increased from 14,000 to more than 21,000 through fiscal year 2011. VA has also attempted to increase access to mental health care through the use of telemental health services and requiring that veterans who are referred for mental health services receive follow-up care within 14 days.

Although we appreciate the efforts of VA to better meet the mental health needs of veterans, we believe that VA must take further steps to ensure that veterans receive the care that they have earned and deserve. One of the areas that we are the most concerned about is the amount of time veterans must wait for appointments for VA mental health services. In response to a July 2011 hearing in the Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs, Chairman Patty Murray requested VA to conduct a survey to determine access to mental health care in the VA system.

According to Chairman Murray, the survey of VA's mental health providers showed that almost 40 percent of providers are unable to schedule an appointment in their own clinic within the VA mandated 14 day window. In addition, 70 percent of providers reported lacking the adequate staff or space needed to meet the mental health care requirements of the veterans they serve. Furthermore, 46 percent of providers lacked appointments for veterans during off-hours.

We believe that it is unacceptable that veterans who need mental health services, particularly in light of the connection between suicide and psychiatric disorders, are unable to receive help when they need it the most. Ensuring that VA has a robust mental health system is a critical component to decreasing the incidence of suicide among our nation's veterans. We anxiously await the results of the formal audit requested by Chairman Murray and Ranking Member Richard Burr on December 6, 2011, into wait times for mental health services.

CCD and the MHLG are broad coalitions that include many organizations that have an extensive history of advocacy on and expertise in mental health services. As a result, we would like to offer our assistance in helping VA further improve access to mental health services for our nation's veterans. To increase access to mental health services, we believe that clinicians must be given the time and resources to provide veterans with evidence-based therapies that represent the best practices for addressing veterans' specific needs. Ensuring that veterans receive the best possible therapies may ultimately decrease waiting times through better long-term results. We also believe that VA should leverage the full range of certified mental health professionals, including psychiatric social workers and licensed professional counselors, to increase access to these best practice therapies.

For many of us working in communities throughout the country, there is tremendous urgency to ensuring the availability of mental health services as these conflicts draw down and service members return to their communities. According to an October 2011 report from Pew Research Center, the needs are vast and complex. Pew reported three particularly compelling findings. First, 44 percent of post-9/11 veterans say their readjustment to civilian life was hard compared to 25 percent of veterans who served in earlier eras. Specifically, nearly half of all post-9/11 veterans say they have had strained family relations since leaving military service, and 47 percent report experiencing frequent anger outbursts. Second, nearly four-in-ten post-9/11 veterans have either been formally diagnosed with or believe that they have experienced post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) compared to 16 percent of veterans who served prior to 9/11. Third, these issues are most prevalent among post-9/11 combat veterans. Forty-nine percent of these veterans say they have suffered from PTSD. In addition, fifty-two percent report having had emotionally traumatic or distressing experiences during military service.

We appreciate your leadership on behalf of our nation's veterans with mental health concerns. We stand ready to work in partnership to ensure that all veterans are able to reintegrate in to their communities and remain valued, contributing members of society.

If you have any questions or would like further information, please contact Heather Ansley, Co-Chair for the Consortium for Citizens with Disabilities Veterans and Military Families Task Force, at (202) 556-2076, ext. 7702 or by e-mail at [hansley@vetsfirst.org](mailto:hansley@vetsfirst.org), or Trevor Summerfield, Co-Chair of the MHLG Social Services Committee, at (202) 449-3600, ext. 102 or by e-mail at [tsummerfield@afsp.org](mailto:tsummerfield@afsp.org) .

Sincerely,

ACCSES

American Association for Geriatric Psychiatry  
American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy  
American Association for Psychoanalysis in Clinical Social Work  
American Association of Pastoral Counselors  
American Association on Health and Disability  
American Dance Therapy Association  
American Foundation for Suicide Prevention  
American Group Psychotherapy Association  
American Mental Health Counselors Association  
American Psychiatric Association  
American Psychoanalytic Association  
American Psychotherapy Association  
Anxiety Disorders Association of America  
Association for Ambulatory Behavioral Healthcare  
Association for the Advancement of Psychology  
Bazelon Center for Mental Health Law  
Brain Injury Association of America  
Children and Adults with Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (CHADD)  
Clinical Social Work Association  
The Confederation of Independent Psychoanalytic Institutes  
The Depression and Bipolar Support Alliance (DBSA)  
Eating Disorders Coalition  
Easter Seals  
Health & Disability Advocates  
Mental Health America  
National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI)  
National Association for Children's Behavioral Health  
National Association of County Behavioral Health and Developmental Disability Directors  
National Association of Mental Health Planning & Advisory Councils  
National Association of Psychiatric Health Systems  
National Council for Community Behavioral Healthcare  
The National Council on Independent Living  
National Disability Rights Network  
National Federation of Families for Children's Mental Health  
NISH  
Paralyzed Veterans of America

Treatment Communities of America  
VetsFirst, a program of United Spinal Association  
Vietnam Veterans of America  
Witness Justice

CC: The Honorable Patty Murray, Chairman, Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs  
The Honorable Richard Burr, Ranking Member, Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs  
The Honorable Jeff Miller, Chairman, House Committee on Veterans' Affairs  
The Honorable Bob Filner, Ranking Member, House Committee on Veterans' Affairs