

News Release

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
September 28, 2010

Contact: Anne Atkins
(804) 371-0441

Study of Virginia veterans shows gaps in treatment services; helps bring in federal funding

A study of 2,000 Virginia veterans, commissioned by the Virginia Wounded Warrior Program and conducted by Virginia Tech, shows that combat stress and depression pose challenges for many veterans, especially those in rural areas. The study also found that, despite increased screening, U.S. military screening procedures allow veterans with diagnosable injuries to slip through the cracks without getting help.

According to veterans and medical professionals, the effects of post traumatic stress (PTSD) and traumatic brain injury (TBI) can take months, even years, to surface. Although significant strides are being made by the U.S. Military, returning military personnel may not reveal or admit to a mental health concern because of fear of negative consequences. Doing so could delay reunification with family while additional tests are conducted and mental health concerns can also destroy a military career.

The study included a mapping component showing locations of key veterans' services and identifying gaps between state and government services and veterans' healthcare needs. "For example, the maps show a large gap in southwestern Virginia, where there are high rates of depression and PTSD, but limited access to services," explained Catherine Wilson, Executive Director of the Virginia Wounded Warrior Program.

The study examined unemployment, life satisfaction, substance abuse treatment, and other health problems. Findings showed higher levels of satisfaction in Northern Virginia where two-thirds of veterans have fulltime jobs, and concerns in the Tidewater area about whether doctors are overmedicating veterans with PTSD.

Other findings indicated veterans want more help with employment, training, and education; health-care providers need to be more competent to understand and treat mental health and brain injury

conditions in veterans deployed in combat areas; and stigma still exists in the minds of veterans about asking for help with psychological issues. Virginia's high and growing rate of female veterans may pose new challenges in terms of service deficits and needed system changes.

"This study is a gold mine of data because it helps us pinpoint where services are needed most and what kinds of services are needed," said Wilson. "We know that severe brain injury, depression, and PTSD are problems for veterans in Virginia, and it's unacceptable for society to let these men and women suffer when there are ways to help."

Study results have already been used to support a grant proposal to the U.S. Health Services Resources Administration. Findings showing high rates of self-reported incarceration, homelessness, and mental health diagnoses among veterans in southwestern Virginia illustrated the need for expanded treatment in rural counties. As a result, VWWP, in collaboration with the Virginia Department of Health, will receive \$300,000 annually for three years to expand the VWWP in southwestern Virginia.

"The study has already helped us obtain significant federal funding," said Wilson. "But, this is just the tip of the iceberg. We'll use the data from this study for years to come to pinpoint the types of services needed most and the areas of greatest need. I'm sure other state and federal agencies will be interested in using the data from this research as well."

The study can be accessed at

http://www.dvs.virginia.gov/downloads/rptsnpubs_VWWPProgressReport2010_FINAL_8410.pdf

The Virginia Wounded Warrior program, part of the Virginia Department of Veterans Services, coordinates support services for veterans and members of the National Guard and Reserves who have stress-related and traumatic brain injuries resulting from their service. It ensures that these veterans and their families receive timely assessment, treatment, and support.

###