

Mental health centers for war troops proposed

by Rick Rogers

SAN DIEGO - Hundreds of thousands of service members nationwide could benefit from medical centers dedicated to treating war-spawned mental illness and brain injuries, two U.S. senators said Tuesday in introducing a bill to create such facilities.

The Pentagon has no specialized centers to lead research on those conditions, develop treatment standards for them or train health professionals nationwide on how to administer the most up-to-date care.

"Our troops are risking their lives for this country, and we owe them nothing less than the best care in return," said Sen. Barbara Boxer, D-Calif., who is co-sponsoring the legislation with Sen. Joe Lieberman, D-Conn.

If passed into law, "The Mental Health Care for Our Wounded Warriors Act of 2007" would direct the Pentagon to establish at least two centers. They would likely be part of existing military hospitals in regions with many service members.

The Pentagon would have up to six months from the legislation's enactment to designate the sites, tell Congress how much money they need and specify other details for the system.

The bill also would require Pentagon officials to inform Congress about what they're doing to reduce a shortage of mental-health specialists at military hospitals. In recent months, various surveys have documented the understaffing and highlighted widespread burnout among remaining psychologists, psychiatrists and other related workers.

"I think the biggest point of this legislation is the acknowledgment that 'Houston, we have a problem.' The Defense Department ... underestimated both the physical and mental trauma caused by this war," said John Pike, director of the military think tank GlobalSecurity.org.

About 1.5 million service members have fought in the Iraq or Afghanistan wars. Numerous studies have estimated that 17 percent to 33 percent of them suffer mental health problems such as post-traumatic stress disorder, and that one in 10 have experienced a traumatic brain injury. Both conditions can require years of expensive and highly specialized treatment.

Pike gave the bill a "pretty good chance" of becoming law.

"I consider this the down payment on what it is eventually going to cost to take care of injured veterans," he said.

Joe Violante, national legislative director for Disabled American Veterans, praised Boxer and Lieberman for trying to improve care for troops while they're still on active duty.

"The centers would be a way to develop experts," said Violante, who estimated that it would cost hundreds of millions of dollars to start such facilities. "Eventually, you hope they will address issues at places like Camp Pendleton (Calif.) and Fort Bragg (N.C)."

Camp Pendleton's Marine Corps units have gone through two major rounds of deployment to Iraq, and some of them have served four tours of war duty in recent years. Their most recent wave, which largely ended last month, involved more than 25,000 Marines and sailors.

Once service members leave the military, they usually receive two years of free care from the Veterans Affairs system. The concept of creating specialized centers for certain medical conditions also has been discussed in the VA system.

There's a great need to not only train more people in the best ways to treat mental disorders such as PTSD, but also for research to find better therapies, said Jeffrey L. Matloff, former program director of the PTSD team at the San Diego VA Healthcare System.

"The ideal is to have education and dissemination of information so that we're all up to speed on the latest interventions and techniques, so people at Balboa naval hospital are practicing the same state-of-the-art care" as clinicians at the VA hospital, he said.

Correspondent Cheryl Clark contributed to this report.