

PalmBeachPost

Lead Editorial

Tell truth on vets' health

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Palm Beach Post Editorial Board

The most comprehensive independent study of Iraq and Afghanistan veterans has sounded a sobering warning about the long-term effects of the wars on U.S. troops and their families.

The non-profit Rand Corp. found that 300,000 veterans have returned home suffering from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder or major depression, and another 320,000 have traumatic brain injuries ranging from mild concussions to severe head wounds. Roughly one in five war vets have psychological or cognitive damage that is likely to afflict them for years, or in the worst cases, the rest of their lives.

Much of that damage remains undiagnosed and untreated. Only 53 percent of service members with PTSD or depression have sought help, and only 43 percent of those with head injuries have seen physicians. The Rand researchers estimate that treating their psychological problems would cost about \$5.2 billion for the first two years after their return. The long-term cost in dollars and anguish - to taxpayers, families and communities - is beyond calculation.

The report comes after revelations that the Department of Veterans Affairs hid the number of veterans who have attempted suicide. Congress obtained internal VA e-mails that put the number at 12,000 a year - not fewer than 800, as the agency's officials had claimed publicly. Dr. Ira Katz, the VA's mental health director, wrote e-mails to associates that contradicted his testimony to Congress and worried about the true numbers getting out. They did, only because of a class-action lawsuit filed by two veterans groups that want the VA to give vets the treatment they deserve.

More than 300 senators and representatives in Congress are co-sponsoring bills to expand veterans' health care and GI Bill benefits. Rep. Ron Klein, D-Boca Raton, supports a five-point plan that mandates adequate funding for health care and increases benefits for National Guard and Reserves members. Rep. Klein correctly wants to elevate provisions for Iraq and Afghanistan veterans to "priority budgeting" status.

The plan seeks to give the country an accurate picture of the long-term costs of the war - both in dollars and in human terms. It is a picture the VA and the Bush administration have distorted for too long.