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ONE HUNDRED NINTH CONGRESS

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December 1, 2006

The Honorable Jim Nicholson
Secretary
Department of Veterans Affairs
Washington, DC 20420

Dear Mr. Secretary:

I commend VA's mental health staff for their openness in identifying systemic gaps in VA's capacity to provide high quality mental health care and developing a comprehensive plan to address deficiencies in VA's mental health care services. VA's Mental Health Strategic Plan (MHSP) is a good plan, but without the commitment to fully fund the mental health care proposals it contains, improvements in VA's mental health services will not be achieved. The Administration promised to commit \$100 million in FY 2005 and \$200 million in FY 2006 to fund some new mental health care initiatives, but according to the final report of the Government Accountability Office (GAO), the Administration did not even come close to actually spending the funds needed to implement these mental health efforts.

At best, VA can account for spending \$165 million of the promised \$300 million for mental health care initiatives over two years. This means VA spent only 55 cents of every dollar the Administration claimed it would spend to close gaps in VA's mental health care services.

VA's failure to spend, over two years, the full \$300 million needed to help sustain and repair VA's mental health care capacity demonstrates a serious lack of accountability. I am concerned that the failure to fully spend the budgeted funds for mental health care programs may also reflect a lack of commitment to implement the MHSP and a desire to deny the existence of any gaps in VA's capacity to provide veterans with high quality mental health care. VA's failure to fully fund mental health care initiatives in FY 2005 and FY 2006 may adversely affect VA's ability to meet the needs of recent combat veterans and veterans from previous conflicts.


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At the time VA mental health experts identified gaps in VA's mental health care services and then developed the MHSP to address those shortcomings, few veterans from the battlefields in Iraq and Afghanistan had turned to the VA for mental health care. Since then, the number of veterans who may need mental health care services to readjust and recover has vastly exceeded VA's initial projections. This February, VA informed the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs that it anticipated 2,900 new cases of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) among returning veterans from Iraq and Afghanistan in FY 2006. VA's own utilization reports show that the number of new PTSD case may be six times higher. In FY 2006, VA saw 17,827 additional veterans who served in Iraq and Afghanistan with an initial diagnosis of PTSD. It is clear that VA substantially underestimated the mental health care needs of returning veterans.

VA may have exacerbated the strain on mental health care capacity due to increased demand by failing to spend dollars the Administration had claimed it targeted for PTSD and returning combat veterans. GAO found that VA failed to allocate and spend at least \$16 million VA had claimed it would spend to help veterans with PTSD and veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan in FY 2005 and FY 2006. It is unacceptable that needed mental health care funds were never distributed or spent.

The initiatives identified in the MHSP need to be funded as promised. VA must correct the gaps in VA's mental health care services that VA's mental health care experts have identified. As the Administration prepares its budget for FY 2008, VA must add back the \$135 million it failed to allocate or spend for mental health initiatives while matching the \$306 million VA has budgeted for in FY 2007 for the mental health initiatives. I urge you to commit at least \$441 million in FY 2008 to implement the mental health initiatives in VA's MHSP.

Sincerely,


MICHAEL H. MICHAUD
Ranking Democratic Member
Subcommittee on Health