

Senate Veterans Affairs Speech

Good evening, Madame Chair and committee members. My name is Jonna Phillips. I am the Therapy Program Director for Veteran Resilience Project, a Licensed Therapist, spouse of an active-duty army Veteran, and have served for almost 23 years in the Air National Guard. Currently, I am a Major and the Director of Equal Opportunity at the 148th Fighter Wing in Duluth, Minnesota and work on the Sexual Harassment Task Force for the Minnesota Air National Guard. I thank you for this dedicated time to speak about the vital importance of Veterans' mental health.

To start, I want to provide you with how your support is critical in reducing barriers to care. Overall, there is a reduction in stigmatization around seeking mental health support, however, embedded in the military culture is the call to serve others before yourself or the belief that one should be able to handle it. I often remind my military clients that although they are soldiers, they are human soldiers.

In 2017 The Minnesota Department of Veterans Affairs (MDVA) contracted with Wilder Research to conduct a behavioral health needs assessment of Veterans in Minnesota. This study reported that barriers reported by Veterans were concerns over effect on their employment, how the Veteran will be seen by others, the effect on future military service, access to transportation, and not believing that services will help. Over

half indicated that they may not be accessing services due to not having a VA diagnosis.

A continued barrier for both Veterans and service members is once they initiate the therapy process, the amount of additional steps required to receive a diagnosis or to start therapy. One example of this is Tricare insurance, which is the insurance the Department of Defense provides military members and their families. Currently, if a service member would like to see a mental health therapist, they first need a primary doctor's referral, and even if a member takes action to receive this from their doctor, they are only approved for 5 sessions at a time. This process delays the start of therapy several weeks if not months. Another example, is that after 20 years of service and 6 deployments it took 6 different visits with 5 different providers for my husband to receive a PTSD diagnosis. Having to share his trauma repeatedly with complete strangers was defeating. After one visit he stated that he now understands the belief that it would be easier not to be here than to go through a process like that.

For a service member to reach out for support and then to experience roadblocks often leads to discontinuing the process and therefore untreated mental health symptoms.

This committee must understand that the longer the mental health symptoms go untreated, the higher the risk becomes for using negative coping mechanisms such as substance abuse, self-harm, and isolation. The Wilder study identified that 35%

of Veterans struggled with Suicidal Ideation. In addition, the MDVA has reported that the current rate for death by suicide for Minnesota Veterans is 100 lives per year.

As a Minnesota nonprofit, Veteran Resilience Project (VRP) staff and Board works tirelessly to reduce barriers to care. VRP's mission is to effectively treat Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and trauma, including Military Sexual Trauma, amongst Minnesota Veterans. VRP does this by providing and building awareness of EMDR Therapy, which stands for Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing. EMDR Therapy is recognized by the National Center for PTSD, the VA, and the World Health Organization as one of the top 5 methods of treating Military PTSD and trauma. Through understanding the effectiveness of EMDR, Minnesota Legislature passed bill HF792/SF2102 in 2021 and the MDVA Grant with Veteran Resilience Project became effective on March 18th, 2022.

Since March VRP has focused on increasing the number of therapists in our Network and provided two Advanced EMDR Military Trainings for the therapists throughout the state. Through this, we doubled the therapists in our Network and now have 40 EMDR Therapists and half of these therapists offer telehealth services to increase access to care. Additionally, VRP works to educate Veterans, service members, families, the community, and veteran organization that PTSD and trauma symptoms are not just something a Veteran has to live with,

but rather there is effective treatment that reduces symptoms and increases quality of life.

However, much like the barriers reported with Tricare, Veteran Resilience Project would be remiss not to share with you our three main challenges. First, service members that are currently in the national guard or reserves are requested to ask their commanders for a “letter of verification”. This request for members struggling with PTSD or trauma is very unrealistic and again leaves service members with untreated mental health symptoms. We are requesting that these individuals be able to use their current military ID as a form of verification.

Next, therapists in our network have identified the need for additional sessions when working with Veterans who have Complex PTSD or multiple Traumas. Currently the grant allows for 12 free sessions. VRP would like to request that additional session requests be approved by the Therapy Program Director. This request would only use funds already provided through the grant.

Lastly, the various impacts of the military lifestyle on the supporting spouse can often go unnoticed. Spouses have identified to VRP that they have been holding their own invisible wounds. A study done on the secondary traumatization of wives of war Veterans stated, “As more than a third of war veterans wives met the criteria for secondary traumatic stress, any treatment offered to veterans with PTSD must address the traumatization of their family.” As we move

forward into 2023, we ask that you consider supporting a bill to include Veterans' and service members' spouses to receive EMDR Therapy through the MDVA Grant.

The actions this committee takes directly impact Minnesota Veteran's mental health care. Steps such as making the verification process easier, removing a cap on the number of sessions and allowing spouses to receive evidence-based EMDR Therapy reduces barriers and increases quality of care. Please continue to partner with VRP as we work to "Bring our Veterans all the Way Home."

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