

Congresswoman Matsui Calls for Resources to Meet Growing Mental Health Needs of our Armed Forces

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Nation must fulfill health care promise to our veterans

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Sacramento, CA – With the men and women from Afghanistan, Congresswoman Doris O. Matsui (CA-5) was joined by Iraq War veteran Nick Haner at the Sacramento Veterans Resource Center to highlight the need for increased resources for veteran mental health services, including the treatment of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Over 64,000 soldiers from Iraq and Afghanistan have sought mental health treatment, which is one of the most common treatments sought by recently discharged troops, according to a health care report by the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). Also participating was Peter Cameron, Founder of Vietnam Veterans of California and John Henry Parker, Founder of Veterans and Families. “Our nation is facing a growing challenge to provide our men and women in uniform the mental health services they need. These men and women who serve in our Armed Forces have proudly dedicated their lives to protecting our country. They have kept their commitment to service and protect. It is now time for us to keep ours,” stated Congresswoman Matsui. Despite the warnings of veterans’ groups and some Members of Congress, officials at the VA have failed to account for rising long-term health care costs and have relied on projections based on outdated information, which did not factor in the effect of the Iraq war. Roughly 300,000 men and women have served in Iraq. If the present rate of PTSD continues, we are looking at thousands of veterans nationwide seeking help. This will place additional strain on a system already lacking the necessary resources. In June 2005, the VA informed Congress that the department would have a health care shortfall of nearly \$1 billion in fiscal year 2005. Unfortunately, the shortfall was actually \$3 billion, spanning both the fiscal years of 2005 and 2006. The Congresswoman continued, “And with our soldiers fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan we must ensure that when they return they have the mental health care that they need. So far, over 15% of veterans in the VA Northern California Health Care System who served in Iraq and Afghanistan have sought out mental health services. These numbers are only likely to grow.” During House consideration of the FY07 Military Quality of Life Appropriations bill, which funds the VA, Congresswoman Matsui voted to increase their funding by \$3 billion. Additionally, in September, she joined her colleagues to send a letter to President Bush urging him to adequately fund the VA in his FY 08 Budget. She has also joined with her colleagues to introduce the New G.I. Bill of Rights. It calls for, among other things, the prevention, early detection, and treatment of PTSD for returning troops; the extension of Vietnam veterans' eligibility for readjustment counseling services until 2010; and the collection of data from pre- and post-deployment health assessments, and preventive maintenance post-deployment intervention “Because we know what we are facing, VA budget shortfalls are unconscionable. The VA’s budget must accurately reflect the growing financial requirements of the VA and veteran’s health care needs. At the same time, mental health programs should not be where we try to enact cost-saving measures” PTSD is a psychiatric disorder that can occur following the experience or witnessing of life-threatening events like military combat. People who suffer from PTSD often relive the experience through nightmares and flashbacks, have difficulty sleeping, and feel detached or estranged, and these symptoms can be severe enough and last long enough to significantly impair the person's daily life. PTSD is marked by clear biological changes as well as psychological symptoms. It is usually treated by a variety of forms of psychotherapy and drug therapy. ###

