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Inter-Agency Effort to Increase Access to Mental Health Services Responds to Executive Order

WASHINGTON – Today, the Departments of Veterans Affairs (VA), Defense (DoD) and Health and Human Services (HHS) announced the progress made to date on initiatives called for in President Obama's August 31, 2012, Executive Order to Improve Access to Mental Health Services for Veterans, Service Members, and their families.

"We have made strong progress to expand Veterans' access to quality mental health services, and President Obama has challenged us to do even more," said Secretary of Veterans Affairs Eric K. Shinseki. "Our ongoing, joint efforts reflect our commitment to the health and well-being of the men and women who have served the Nation."

"One of the great challenges we face as a nation is how to provide quality, accessible, long term, mental health care for service members, veterans and their families. Using the combined resources and expertise from across the government we are advancing services for those who have sacrificed so much for our nation," said Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel.

President Obama's Executive Order directed VA, DoD, and HHS, in coordination with other federal agencies, to take a number of steps to ensure that Veterans, Service Members, and their families receive the mental health services and support they need.

"There's no more important work than taking care of those who protect our nation," said Health and Human Services Secretary Kathleen Sebelius. "By working together, we can make sure our service men and women, our veterans, and their families have the behavioral health services they need to build healthy and fulfilling lives."

Today, the Departments released an interim report, found here, outlining progress on this initiative, including:

- Increasing the capacity of the Veterans Crisis Line by 50 percent to help ensure that Veterans in crisis can readily reach help.
- Establishing 15 pilot projects in seven states where VA is working with community-based mental health providers to help Veterans access mental health services in a timely way.
- Increasing VA mental health services capacity through VA hiring of nearly 1,400 mental health providers and 248 new peer specialists.
- Implementing a national suicide prevention campaign to connect Veterans and Service Members to mental health services.

The Departments are actively working on additional deliverables called for in the Executive Order, including the development of a National Research Action Plan.

Federal Department actions to date include:

Suicide Prevention: VA and DoD jointly developed and are implementing a national suicide prevention campaign to connect Veterans and Service Members to mental health services. This year-long effort began Sep. 1, 2012. The program continues to save lives and link Veterans with effective ongoing mental health services on a daily basis. As of March 2013, the Veterans Crisis Line (1-800-273-8255, press 1) has received over 814,000 calls, over 94,000 chats, as well as over 7,200 texts, and has helped more than 28,000 Veterans in imminent danger. VA has also completed the hiring and training of additional staff to increase the capacity of the Veterans Crisis Line that were called for in the Executive Order. In addition, the DoD has initiated a thorough review of its mental health and substance abuse prevention, education and outreach programs informed by the expertise of the Department of Health and Human Services' Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration.

Enhanced Partnerships Between the VA and Community Providers: VA worked with HHS to help identify potential local community resources to improve Veterans access to mental health services. VA has enhanced access to mental health care by establishing 15 VA pilot agreements with clinics in local communities to improve access to mental health service.

Expanded VA Mental Health Staffing: As of May 7, 2013, VA has hired a total of 1,360 mental health clinical providers towards the goal of 1,600 new mental health professionals outlined in the Executive Order. Additionally, VA has hired 2,036 mental health clinical providers to fill existing vacancies. VA has also hired nearly 250 new peer specialists in support of the specific goal of 800 peer specialists outlined in the Executive Order. The interim report indicated that as of Jan. 29, 2013, VA had hired 1,058 mental health clinical providers in support of the specific goal of 1,600 mental health professionals, and over 100 peer specialists in support of the specific goal of 800 peer specialists.

Improved Research and Development: The development of a National Research Action Plan to better understand and develop treatments for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), traumatic brain injury (TBI), and co-occurring conditions; and identify strategies to support collaborative research efforts to address suicide prevention is underway. VA, DoD and HHS and the Department of Education have collaborated and submitted the plan on time. DoD and VA are investing more than $100 million in new research to improve diagnosis and treatment of Traumatic Brain Injury (mTBI) and Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). They have launched two initiatives to establish joint DoD/VA research consortia with academia and industry partnerships to study the chronic effects of mild TBI and PTSD.

Working together, the Departments will continue to expand the public health approach to providing optimal support for the mental health needs of Veterans, Service Members and their families. They also will continue to provide updates on their work as it progresses.

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