



Testimony for House Veterans' Affairs Subcommittee on Health Legislative Hearing

Tuesday November 17th, 2015

Provided by the American Counseling Association

The American Counseling Association is privileged and honored to submit additional testimony in support of various legislation being considered by the House Veterans Affairs Committee that would improve access to care for millions of men and women that served our nation. At the American Counseling Association, we hold our profession's service to the veteran population in the highest regard and strive to provide critical mental health care and access to those most in need.

HR 1319 – The Ask Veterans Act

With all of the recently documented issues at the VA in terms of providing timely mental health care and other services, it is vital that the agency understand the demands and outcomes directly from the population it is serving. As a system, the VA is highly regarded but it should be able to shift to demands in care and any other process issues that might arise. Given the expected influx of veterans coming into the system as the US brings additional troops home from stations overseas, the VA needs to understand where the need for care is and the best way to address it. This legislation is the first step in achieving that goal.

HR 1603 – The Military Sexual Assault Victims Empowerment Act

As an organization representing licensed professional counseling, our members and thousands of mental health professionals across the country talk with patients dealing with trauma resulting from sexual assault every day. Such a traumatic event needs to be addressed and dealt with in a manner of urgency. We support the intent of this legislation in bringing parity to sexual assault incidents within the VA.

HR 3234 – The Failing VA Medical Center Recovery Act

As a nation, we should accept nothing less than the best for our veterans. If there is a VA hospital that is not meeting the highest of standards, it should be made public so that changes can be made. This legislation represents a common sense solution to bring more transparency to the care received by veterans to ensure their needs are met.

VA Legislative Proposal – VA Purchased Healthcare Streamlining and Modernization Act

We believe that the process that veterans go through to receive care should be as streamlined and efficient as possible. We also know from recent data that access to health care in rural areas is something that the VA is focusing on intently. We support the Secretary entering into agreements with providers outside the VA system



but would caution against a blanket reliance on other federal programs, such as Medicare. The licensed professional counseling profession has been hit by this inequity under the Choice Program, which overwhelmingly passed Congress last year. There are 150,000+ LPCs across the country, predominantly in rural areas, and they cannot participate in the Choice program because they are currently not recognized by Medicare. Licensed Professional Counselors ARE recognized by third party insurance providers, the DoD, TRICARE, the VA, Medicaid, Indian Health Service; essentially all other major healthcare payers in this country. In this proposal, there should be flexibility provided to the Secretary to enter into agreements with those providers recognized by the VA. A reliance on another federal program could actually reduce access to veterans while trying to pass legislation that is aimed at increasing that access.

Draft Bill – The PROMISE Act

Mental health care delivery has begun to change in this country into a more integrated environment. There have been many pieces of legislation passed in the last five years that brings mental health care to parity with physical health care. There are numerous studies showing a direct connection between treatment of mental issues and physical ailments. Perhaps that is best understood with the veteran population; PTSD and other mental health issues may become co-morbid with a physical ailment such as a loss of a limb or other chronic pain. A veteran suffering from PTSD or depression is less likely to keep up with their physical needs if the mental issues are not being treated. We must ensure that the VA is looking at the patient in their entirety and consider the impact of the mental on the physical. The PROMISE Act would put the VA on a path to creating that integrated environment that will lead to more stable/predictable patient outcomes as well as a healthier and more cost-efficient system overall.

One of the main issues facing veterans today is the over-prescription of pharmaceuticals. The licensed professional counseling profession is trained to treat patients suffering from mental disorders without the use of pharmaceutical drugs. Too often, veterans are medicated when all they may need is a talk therapy session that focuses on their underlying issues/problems. Many mental health professionals are comfortable working with physicians in private practice and can refer a patient if advanced treatment is needed. The VA could put a system in place that begins the treatment at the therapeutic level while increasing treatment for those in need of that remedy.

We also support the PROMISE Act seeking to recognize other variations of therapeutic delivery. There are a number of options available to patients and people will respond differently to other treatments. As an organization, the American Counseling Association would like to work with Rep. Bilirakis and the Committee to educate members on the availability and positive outcomes related to the other types of therapy listed in the legislation.



Thank you again for the opportunity to provide testimony. We cherish our ability to serve veterans and hope to increase the number of highly qualified licensed professional counselors available to the VA so that we can finally address mental health workforce access issues across the system.

Please contact me with any further questions or clarifications.

Sincerely,

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About The American Counseling Association

The American Counseling Association is a not-for-profit, professional and educational organization that is dedicated to the growth and enhancement of the counseling profession. With more than 55,000 members, we are the world's largest association representing professional counselors in various practice settings.