

America's Newspapers & World News -- Newsroom Edition

Law opens Veterans Home door to Guard

New Hampshire Union Leader (Manchester, NH) - Saturday, June 19, 2010

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By DENIS PAISTE

New Hampshire Union Leader

MANCHESTER -- Veterans from Iraq and Afghanistan are older, more seriously injured and more often female than in past conflicts, VA Boston Healthcare System officials say.

Yesterday, Gov. John Lynch signed a law making it easier for New Hampshire National Guardsmen and reservists to enter the state Veterans Home in Tilton. The law lowers the requirements for active duty time that barred many guardsmen and reservists from the Veterans Home and forced them to turn to other nursing facilities for long-term care, said Adjutant Gen. William Reddel.

Forty-five percent of returning troops are receiving some form of health care from the VA, and mental health is the VA's second most sought-after form of treatment after muscular-skeletal injuries.

Traumatic brain injury is the signature wound of Iraq and Afghanistan veterans, according to Michael Lawson, CEO of three Veterans Administration hospitals in Boston.

Lawson, a Vietnam veteran, was one of three VA representatives who spoke to the Blue Cross Blue Shield of Massachusetts Foundation Health Coverage Fellowship last month.

Mild concussions can produce symptoms identical to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Those symptoms include short tempers, trouble with alcohol and being easily angered.

Hearing loss is also prevalent.

Better medical response to wounded military personnel in the field means more of them survive serious injuries and require further care.

Women make up 12 percent of the fighting force in Iraq and Afghanistan.

One of them is Andy Jean-Baptiste, who served in a combat support hospital Level II (trauma) in Iraq, working as a patient administration specialist. At 23, she was responsible for eight other soldiers.

She last served in Anbar province in western Iraq, where mortar attacks were frequent.

Jean-Baptiste has a bachelor's degree in psychology and thought of going to nursing school. But after her Iraq service, she decided to tackle mental health problems because of the suicides she had seen on her base.

That was the impetus to go into social work and to work with veterans.

"We had one psychiatrist to take care of all the soldiers in that area (Anbar)," Jean-Baptiste said.

"I felt good to be at the VA," she said. "I was dealing with people who are like me."

In Nashua yesterday, Lynch signed the law at Harbor Homes, surrounded by veterans and local and state officials. Harbor Homes provides services to veterans, including shelter for homeless

veterans.

"Members of a new and growing generation of combat veterans are returning home every day. We must remain committed to honoring our veterans, showing them respect and working to get them the services and assistance they deserve," Lynch said.

Of the current 2,800 New Hampshire Air and Army National Guardsmen, nearly 50 percent are combat veterans. In the fall, an additional 700 New Hampshire Army National Guardsmen will deploy to the Middle East, which means nearly 1,000 members of the New Hampshire National Guard will be serving in combat overseas.

Mel Tapper, a VA specialist in post-traumatic stress disorder, said, "The VA as an organization has recognized we have to look out for returning conflict veterans in a way we have not in the past.

"There are more women in combat than ever," Tapper said.

Massachusetts National Guard troops, for example, spend 72 hours in state service, time during which they are briefed about the readjustment process.

Every soldier is enrolled into the VA health care system.

Ninety to 120 days later, they are re-evaluated using a post deployment health care assessment.

"At that point in time, an individual is more willing to talk," Tapper said.

Deployments are longer than any in previous wars. The average draftee was in Vietnam for 11 months. Many troops in Iraq and Afghanistan are on their second and third deployments.

And it's the first conflict since the Revolutionary War to be fought with an all-volunteer military.

"You can come back and get a job at Subway; it's difficult," Jean-Baptiste said. She encourages veterans to use the GI Bill to go back to school.

Veterans are eligible for five years of free health care for any condition related to military service and for treatment of a service-related disability for life or as long as they have the condition.

Record Number: mandc5-5uxyazrl7sggipdjlla

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