



AMERICAN PUBLIC HEALTH ASSOCIATION

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American Public Health Association testimony submitted for the record
U.S. Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs hearing on pending health care and benefits legislation
June 29, 2016

The American Public Health Association, a diverse community of public health professionals who champion the health of all people and communities, welcomes the opportunity to submit a statement for the record in support of S. 2210, the Veteran Partners' Efforts to Enhance Reintegration Act. The Veteran PEER Act would require the inclusion of peer support specialists in Patient Aligned Care Teams within medical centers at the Department of Veterans Affairs to encourage the use and integration of mental health services in the primary care setting.

Rates of mental illness are disproportionately high among U.S. veterans, particularly posttraumatic stress disorder, substance abuse disorders, depression, anxiety and military sexual trauma. Every year, up to 20 percent of combat veterans from the Iraq and Afghanistan wars experience PTSD, and more than 20 percent of veterans with PTSD also suffer from an addiction or dependence on drugs or alcohol. In addition, between 2001-2007, non-deployed veterans that served during the Iraq and Afghanistan wars had a 61 percent higher suicide risk compared to the general U.S. population. Military culture promotes inner strength, self-reliance and the ability to shake off injury, which may contribute to stigma surrounding mental health issues. Stigma may create a reluctance to seek help and a fear of negative social consequences, and is the most often cited reason for why people do not seek counseling or other mental health services.

Through a peer support model of care, Peer Specialists—veterans who have recovered or are recovering from a mental health condition—provide veterans with assistance in accessing mental health services, navigating the health care system and building skills needed for a successful recovery. Expanding the peer support model to the primary care setting may offer a key entry point for those reluctant to access mental health services. The bill would also direct the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to consider and address the needs of female veterans when establishing peer support programs, and also include female peer specialists in the program. Additionally, the bill would direct the secretary to consider rural and underserved areas when selecting program locations.

APHA urges the committee to advance S. 2210 to improve access to mental health services within the VA and support the health and wellbeing of U.S. veterans.