

Senator Jay Rockefeller

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Written Statement – Senate Veterans’ Affairs Committee
“VA Mental Health Care: Closing the Gaps”
July 14, 2011

Chairman Murray and Ranking Member Burr, I truly appreciate your commitment to oversight and your efforts to review the gaps in the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) mental health programs. While I am proud of our bipartisan efforts on this committee seeking to improve VA mental health policies and fund additional health professionals to provide care, more must be done. This message is loud and clear from our compelling witnesses today, from reports on my West Virginia veteran’s casework, and from the press reports and estimates of 6,000 suicides a year which is a startling 18 suicides a day.

There are a range of issues that must be addressed. First and foremost, it is essential to honestly access and cope with the waiting list for mental health care. It is important to acknowledge and seek new ways to deal with the issue of stigma in seeking care for both active duty and veterans.

Research on Afghanistan and Iraqi veterans suggests that between 10% up to 20% of troops are likely to have PTSD after they return. Others are at risk for other mental health problems. Estimated rates of depression in returning troops range from 3% to 25%. I have hosted private roundtables with returning West Virginians who have been honest with me about such challenges. It is also true that the more deployments, the more likely our troops will have problems, and we have been at war in Afghanistan for 10 years, and in Iraq for 8 years.

Today’s hearing and the reports from the VA Inspector General can highlight the gaps and help us find new ways to improve our mental health care system – we owe this, and much more, to our veterans and their families.