

DENNIS M. LEWIS, FACHE NETWORK DIRECTOR, VISN 20 DEPARTMENT OF  
VETERANS AFFAIRS

STATEMENT OF  
DENNIS M. LEWIS, FACHE  
NETWORK DIRECTOR, VISN 20  
DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS  
BEFORE THE  
SENATE VETERANS AFFAIRS COMMITTEE

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Good morning Senator Murray. Thank you for the opportunity to discuss the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) NW Health Network and the mental health services we are honored to provide our nation's veterans. I would like to request my written statement be submitted for the record.

Veterans Integrated Service Network (VISN) 20 is fortunate to employ some of the most respected mental health professionals in the country. Through their efforts, and with the support of our dedicated staff, we have expanded mental health capacity and programs tremendously in recent years. In fact, since Fiscal Year (FY) 2005, we increased mental health program staffing by over 20 percent, adding a total of 125 new positions.

Sixty-three of these positions were added in Washington State. Throughout the VISN, these additions have allowed us to improve coordination care delivery in areas such as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), Substance Abuse, Homelessness, and Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI). In all, VISN 20 has introduced 40 new initiatives in Washington, supported by over \$4 million in enhanced funding, since FY 2005.

We also expanded Mental Health services at each our 23 Community Based Outpatient Clinics (CBOCs). In FY 2006, VISN 20 was first in VHA for mental health access in CBOCs.

VISN 20 is also a national leader in Care Coordination and Telehealth, serving almost 1,700 veterans with the latest technologies. We have also introduced tele-mental health at close to half of our CBOCs, allowing us to evaluate and follow patients without them having to travel long distances. This treatment method is especially effective in rural areas, and we will continue to expand it.

Across the country there is a sense of urgency in reaching out to Operation Enduring Freedom/ Operation Iraqi Freedom (OEF/OIF) veterans. Through the end of FY 2006, VISN 20 facilities have treated 12,164 OEF/OIF service members and veterans. In FY 2006, 2,849 OEF/OIF veterans were seen in Washington, 24 percent of whom were diagnosed with PTSD.

We are applying what we have learned through research and clinical experience about the identification and treatment of mental health conditions and other chronic or persistent courses of illness. VISN 20 delivers 21st century care to 21st century combat veterans.

We are conducting aggressive outreach efforts to contact these soldiers. As early as 2004, the VA Puget Sound Health Care System (PSHCS) pioneered a collaborative effort with 8 agencies - including DoD, the State of Washington and other state, Federal and community entities - creating a Memorandum of Understanding focused on coordinating services for returning veterans. These efforts have now been duplicated in Oregon and Idaho with much success. Our medical centers also actively collaborate with state National Guard and Reserve components to ensure that no returning soldier slips through the cracks.

In 2005, VA Puget Sound activated a Deployment Health Clinic (DHC), which consists of an

integrated combat care team who serves as entry points for returning veterans.

VISN 20 also established a regional Polytrauma System of Care. Puget Sound has been designated the Polytrauma Network Site and works directly with VA's Polytrauma Rehabilitation Center in Palo Alto. Our Boise and Portland facilities have established Polytrauma Support Clinic Teams, and each of our facilities have a designated Polytrauma point of contact.

Our Vet Centers provide readjustment counseling and community outreach to combat veterans and their families. By the end of 2007, a new Center will open in Everett, Washington.

In summary, VISN 20 is committed to providing world class mental health care to all veterans, regardless of the era in which they served. We remain keenly aware of the importance of our mission and the challenges which lie ahead. I believe that our current and planned efforts go a long way toward meeting this challenge, I am extremely proud of our staff, and I thank you again for your continued support.

This concludes my statement. At this time I would be pleased to answer any questions you may have.