

Oral Testimony by Dr. Barbara Van Dahlen before the
Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs
"VA Mental Health Care: Ensuring Timely Access to High-Quality Care"
March 20, 2013

Chairman Sanders, Ranking Member Burr, and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for this opportunity to provide testimony. As a clinical psychologist who has spent the last eight years of my career devoted to this cause and as the daughter of a WWII veteran, I am honored to appear before this Committee. And I am proud to offer my assistance to those who serve our country.

The Department of Veterans Affairs remains the principal organization in our nation's effort to ensure that all who wore the uniform receive the mental health care they need. Clearly, the VA has worked hard to keep up with the changing landscape and the growing demands over the last 11 years of war. The VA has increased the number of mental health professionals providing services. It has increased the number of Vet Centers across the country, and it has added additional mobile vet centers in its effort to serve our rural communities. Further, the VA has expanded its call centers and launched the Veterans Crisis Line. Indeed, my organization, Give an Hour, is pleased that we now have a memorandum of agreement with the VA in coordination with the Veteran's Crisis Line. Finally, the VA has become a national leader in integrating mental health care into primary care settings.

But as many of us who come before this committee are fond of saying, no organization, agency, or department can provide all of the education, support, and mental health treatment that every veteran and his or her family needs. It is actually more helpful to those who serve and their families to see numerous endeavors coordinated on their behalf so that they understand that our country—not just our government—supports them and is committed to their health and well-being.

Give an Hour™ is one example of a community-based effort designed to complement the important work of the VA. Give an Hour provides free mental health care and support to service members, veterans, and their families in communities across the country. We have nearly 6,800 providers who have collectively given over 82,000 hours of care. This translates into over \$8.2 million worth of mental health care. If every one of our providers was utilized on a weekly basis, we could provide over \$36 million of

mental health care each year. And we do all this at a cost (to us) of approximately \$17 per hour. We are honored to do our part and eager to do more.

While we have been assured that sequestration will not directly affect VA programs, the impact across government agencies will certainly affect veterans. So we must think collaboratively, creatively, and collectively about how best to knit together the array of resources and services that every community has to offer.

Although progress has been made, we have yet to develop an effective strategy for consistently delivering coordinated care in communities where veterans and their families live and work.

To move toward our goal of ensuring timely access to high quality care for all veterans, it is important to consider several important points.

One size doesn't fit all with respect to support and treatment for our veterans, nor is there a specific progression of care and intervention that is appropriate for every individual in need. For example, some veterans want, need, and will benefit from traditional psychological treatment that can be delivered by the VA or by a community provider like those who volunteer with Give an Hour. In contrast, other veterans are not yet willing or able to accept traditional care even though they are suffering. These veterans might respond more favorably to alternative opportunities and approaches that are available in their communities. And perhaps an alternative approach is all a veteran needs to move forward in life. Or perhaps an alternative form of care might lead to a willingness to seek more traditional treatment for the issues that come home from war.

There are successful models currently being implemented across the country to facilitate the coordination and collaboration of community efforts. Give an Hour's work in North Carolina and in Virginia regularly brings community organizations together to assess gaps and develop solutions. The Community Blueprint—an initiative now with the organization Points of Light—has launched efforts in 42 communities. The focus of this initiative is to identify and coordinate local efforts and to provide opportunities and support for our military and veteran community. Got Your 6—a campaign created by Service Nation—is bringing the entertainment industry together with over two dozen respected nonprofit organizations to further the missions of each organization and to improve the reintegration of veterans into our communities.

The VA has participated, locally and nationally, in discussions and efforts associated with these initiatives and campaigns. Give an Hour has seen the positive impact that coordination with the VA can have in our work in Fayetteville. But we can and must create a more systematic process to knit efforts together if we are to ensure that all who are in need receive proper care.

When I first developed the concept for Give an Hour it was with the—perhaps idealistic—notion that I would build a network of mental health professionals who were prepared to serve and I would “give” this resource to the VA and to DoD. Although I have successfully built the network, giving this service to these agencies has proven to be very challenging. And Give an Hour is but one of many organizations that has much to offer veterans and their families.

How do we get there? The VA has tremendous potential to function as both a catalyst and a convener, to engage and encourage national nonprofits and local efforts in the service of our veterans. The VA can identify—without necessarily endorsing—organizations doing important work to support those who serve. It can bring these organizations together here in Washington and in communities wherever there are VA facilities to explore needs and develop specific strategies that result in actions and outcomes.

If there are policies and regulations that prevent the VA from functioning in this manner, then it is time to review and adjust these policies. We can no longer be hampered by restrictions that prevent us from leveraging all of the resources and expertise available in our offices and in our communities. There is no doubt that greater coordination and collaboration will improve well-being and save lives. There is no doubt that we have the resources needed to attend to those in need. The only doubt is whether we have the will and the determination to meet the challenge together.