



**THE CENTER FOR POLICY, ADVOCACY, AND EDUCATION
OF THE MENTAL HEALTH ASSOCIATION OF NEW YORK CITY**

**Oversight Hearing: Meeting the Current and Future Demand for
Mental Health Services by the Veteran Community in NYC**

The Committee on Mental Health, Mental Retardation, Alcoholism, Drug Abuse
and Disability Services
Hon. Oliver Koppell, Chair
&
The Committee on Veterans
Hon. Mathieu Eugene, Chair

Testimony by Kimberly A. Williams, LMSW

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Dedicated To Improving Mental Health Policy

Chairman Koppell, Chairman Eugene, and members of the Committees, thank you for organizing this hearing on the critically important topic of veterans' mental health and for the opportunity to testify. My name is Kimberly Williams, and I am the Director of the Center for Policy, Advocacy, and Education of the Mental Health Association of NYC. MHA is the Co-Founder and Facilitator of the Veterans' Mental Health Coalition of NYC, which has over 200 members, and the mission of which is to promote the mental health and well-being of New York City service members, veterans, and their families through education, information sharing, collaboration, and promotion of a comprehensive array of services. The Coalition has established a Veterans' Mental Health Action Committee of NYC to promote improved federal, state, and local policy regarding meeting the needs of service members, veterans, and their family members who have mental health and/or substance abuse problems and on whose behalf I am speaking today.

Currently, there are about 220,000 veterans in NYC, most of whom served in periods prior to Iraq and Afghanistan. With the drawdown of troops in Iraq, there will be increasing numbers of service members returning to NYS and NYC with unmet mental health needs. Veterans returning to civilian life from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan suffer from tragically high rates of mental and substance use disorders. Approximately 20% have depression and/or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) as compared to 10-12% of the general population. They are twice as likely to take their own lives. Nationally, an estimated 18 veterans per day complete suicide. Veterans are also more than twice as likely to be homeless and 20 percent more likely to be unemployed.

Families also suffer. Family members are at high risk of depression and other mental disorders in reaction to separation due to deployment, increased caregiver burden, financial difficulties and the disability or death of the family member who has gone to war. Marriages too often collapse, and the children of service members are at increased risk of secondary

traumatization (PTSD symptoms related to witnessing their parent's symptoms) and other emotional problems as well as school failure and substance abuse.

Many veterans and their families need help to deal with these emotional challenges. More than half do not get it. Only 25% of veterans use the Federal VA care system and families generally are not eligible for services provided by the VA despite their considerable need for support. Stigma is a major barrier to receiving mental health care, including fear of negative career consequences. More veterans would likely use the VA if it had more resources and thereby provided greater access, but many veterans prefer to return fully to civilian life and turn to local providers when they need health, mental health, and/or chemical dependency services. Unfortunately, our local systems are often not prepared to properly respond to the unique behavioral health needs of service members, veterans, and their families. The responsibility to improve access to, and quality of, these local services lies with the state and the counties.

As is evident, much needs to be done to expand and improve access to mental health and substance abuse services, address suicide risk, expand housing and employment opportunities, provide training, address the needs of family members, and overcome the stigma of mental illness. Obviously, the current fiscal climate makes confronting these great challenges all the more difficult. But we ask The NYC Council to consider two proposals.

All over NYS, there are Veterans Service Agencies (VSAs). VSAs are the first place veterans go to access federal, state, and local benefits and services to which they are entitled. Services include pensions, compensation, benefits, tax exemptions, employment, VA home loans, and much more. They could also be a place where veterans can get information about mental health resources. Currently, there is no such entity in NYC. Instead veterans are forced to navigate the complex system of benefits and care alone. We urge the NYC Council to fund VSAs in each borough of NYC. These are critical entry points for veterans to getting the help they need.

We also urge the NYC Council to fund a veterans' mental health initiative that would increase support for veterans, service members, and their families through:

- the expansion of state-of-the-art direct services that address the specific mental health needs of veterans and their families
- peer outreach and support
- public education to reduce stigma and misinformation about mental illness and chemical dependence among veterans and their families and improve their knowledge about where to get help and
- workforce training to increase the capacity for community mental health and substance abuse providers to meet the unique needs of our returning veterans and their families

Dedicating a small amount of funding for such an initiative could help to begin to address the vastly unmet mental health needs of the men and women who have put their lives on the line for our nation.

We thank you for the opportunity to speak today. Please feel free to call on us at any time for background information about veterans' mental health or for help in developing strategies to overcome the very significant barriers to providing good services to our brave veterans and their families.