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OPINION

On this Veterans Day, where is the outrage over mental-health crisis?

By MARK C. RUSSELL
Special to The Times

While the national news media, political pundits and our political leaders fixate on such gripping scandals as NFL players protesting during the national anthem and President Donald Trump's alleged bumbled interaction with a Gold Star family, 20 veterans die from suicide every day, as the tragedy of the current military mental-health crisis impacting millions of Americans has completely fallen off the national radar.

This Veterans Day, 75,000 Americans are reportedly moved to boycott NFL games as a demonstration of their allegiance to the sacrifices of veterans who fought and died to preserve the freedoms symbolized by our flag and anthem. However, where is the outrage and organized efforts to end the generational cycle of preventable wartime mental-health crises?

We have an unchallenged 100-year front-line mandate of repeatedly returning psychiatric casualties to combat until they turn to suicide or psychosis.

According to a former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Mike Mullens, in Tom Donahue's documentary "Thank You For Your Service," military suicides are a direct result of war experiences. In the documentary, senior leaders admit they were not allowed to speak of, or prepare for, the "unseen wounds of war."

This helps explain why 90 percent of 133 military mental-health clinicians I surveyed reported no training on top recommended PTSD treatments per the VA and Department of Defense guidelines, and why the 2007 DOD's congressionally mandated task force on

mental health concluded, "The Military Health System lacks the fiscal resources and the fully-trained personnel to fulfill its mission to support psychological health in peacetime or fulfill the enhanced requirements imposed during times of conflict."

This is a transparent admission of recklessly and willfully ignoring generations of well-documented war-trauma lessons. Lessons like the fundamental need to adequately plan, prepare and train for inevitable war-stress casualties, which now unnecessarily endanger the health and lives of more than 2.6 million personnel deployed to war zones at least once, and the 100,000 to 150,000 service members discharged from the military annually.

Such gross negligence is inexcusable given well-documented "lessons learned" and casualty trends since World War II whereby the volume of psychiatric casualties far exceeds the combined total number of soldiers both wounded and killed in action.

I can speak personally to the harmful effects of the military's fragmented system. I was stationed at a remote Marine base in rural Japan as the sole credentialed provider of more than 6,000 personnel. On-call 24/7, 365 days, for four years. I was also required to cover two other military bases. Mass numbers of service members were landing in Japan one day after leaving Iraq, many in bad shape with PTS, suicidal ideation and severe anger.

However, the Navy and Marine Corps policy compelled six licensed civilian mental-health professionals employed at the base community counseling center to refer all

military clients to me. I had a two-to three-month long waitlist. Several of these war veterans committed suicide, were court-martialed or engaged in self-destructive behaviors due to the military's foolish mental-health policies.

We are failing the men and women who put it all on the line for our country. The reason is quite simple: No single agency or military leader is accountable for overseeing military mental-health care. As a result, there is no coordinated policy on training or standardization of treatment. Instead, we have tremendous waste, redundancies and huge financial cost on 226 separate military programs.

Honor our veterans this holiday by demanding the president and congressional representatives to urgently do the following:

- Conduct independent investigations into the cause of the military mental-health-care crisis.
- Establish a unified "Behavioral Health Corps" within the Department of Defense.
- End hiring restrictions of licensed marriage/family therapists, mental-health counselors and clinical psychologists to address chronic staffing shortages.
- Establish a "Joint Services Behavioral Health Lessons Learned Center."
- Compel the VA/military to ensure every veteran has access to all evidence-based therapies per the VA/DoD PTSD guidelines.



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