

Wounded Warrior Project
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March 27, 2017

The Honorable Brad Wenstrup
Chairman
Subcommittee on Health
House Committee on Veterans' Affairs

The Honorable Julia Brownley
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Health
House Committee on Veterans' Affairs

STATEMENT FOR THE RECORD
RE: H.R. 918

Dear Chairman Wenstrup and Ranking Member Brownley,

Over the past several months, a groundswell of community support has drawn attention to veterans with so-called “bad paper discharge” and reinvigorated discussion about what benefits should be available to those whose service was determined to be less than honorable. In many cases, access to educational assistance, disability compensation, and other Department of Veterans Affairs (“VA”) benefits represents fair and deserved reward for sacrifice. For those with mental health challenges arising from service, access to mental health care must be recognized as a pressing entitlement, regardless of discharge status.

Wounded Warrior Project appreciates and agrees with the intent of H.R. 918, the Veterans Urgent Access to Mental Health Care Act, which addresses access to mental health care for those with other than honorable discharges. For too many veterans, trauma in service is the nexus between yesterday’s bad paper discharge and today’s mental health challenges. In our experience, many veterans suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, traumatic brain injury, or military sexual trauma have received bad paper discharges for behavioral problems rooted in the same circumstances that led to those diagnoses. Regardless of cause, it remains that veterans with bad paper discharges are at greater risk for homelessness, substance abuse, incarceration, untreated physical and mental injuries, and suicide.

Given the gravity of this situation, WWP encourages this Subcommittee to continue prioritizing this issue. We look forward to working with the committee to ensure that H.R. 918, and other relevant policy changes, appropriately and fully address the challenges at hand. For instance, while we support H.R. 918’s intent, we believe that it can be improved. The legislation’s eligibility criteria may place administrative demands – such as the need to verify a veteran’s combat service – at odds with the need to provide urgent care. And although H.R. 918 authorizes care for veterans who present with urgent mental health care needs, VA should not be

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placed in a position where it must turn individuals away until their problems worsen and their needs become emergencies. A broader solution can more effectively address needs and diminish the likelihood of bureaucratic hurdles to delivering care.

On March 7th, before members of this Subcommittee, Secretary Shulkin testified that VA would begin providing urgent mental health care for veterans with other than honorable discharges, and indicated that VA is poised start to providing such care under existing authority. Although the implementation details remain to be seen, Secretary Shulkin's signal of support should allow this Subcommittee the extra time needed to ensure that any legislative solutions are appropriately crafted, and that VA has more permanent capacity to handle a surge of veterans seeking mental health care. Time is still of the essence – VA has not announced plans to provide mental health care for veterans with bad paper discharges in non-emergency situations – but care must be taken to ensure that VA is prepared and able to provide the care and support that these veterans need.

Earlier this March, Wounded Warrior Project reached a major milestone in its service to our nation's wounded warriors, their families, and their caregivers. Just weeks ago, Wounded Warrior Project registered its 100,000th post-9/11 injured veteran, who will now have access to our free, life-changing programs and services. This milestone clearly demonstrates that the needs of our nation's veterans are great and growing, and that it is more important than ever for us to stand behind them in their recovery and rehabilitation. Thank you for the opportunity to submit this statement for the record.

Sincerely,

Michael S. Linnington, LTG (ret), U.S. Army
Chief Executive Officer
Wounded Warrior Project

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