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HEALTH CARE CAPSULE

VETERANS' GROWING DEMAND FOR MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) expects demand for its mental health services to grow nationwide, projecting a 32 percent increase in outpatient mental health services over 10 years. This capsule examines how VA plans to meet this need among veterans.

VA MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES

Demand for VA's mental health services has grown over time. The number of veterans receiving mental health care from VA increased by 90 percent from fiscal year 2006 to 2019—more than three times the rate of increase for all VA health care services. During this time, VA's reported mental health budget increased from \$2.4 to \$8.9 billion.

One-third of veterans who received VA care in fiscal year 2018 had at least one diagnosed mental health condition; depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and anxiety are among the most common. Often, veterans are diagnosed with multiple mental health conditions.

Veterans enrolled in VA health care may receive a full array of mental health services from VA, and other veterans may qualify to receive care in certain situations. Mental health treatment can include medication or other therapy, which can be delivered in a number of settings (see fig. 1).

A key focus of VA's mental health efforts is suicide prevention, which is VA's highest priority. The rate of suicide is one and a half times higher for veterans than non-veterans. In 2018, an average of 18 veterans died by suicide each day, and of those, an average of seven had recently obtained care from VA.

Figure 1: Mental Health Care Settings and Services Provided



Source: Department of Veteran Affairs (VA), GAO (photos), GAO analysis (data). | GAO-21-545SP

VA MENTAL HEALTH CARE RESPONSE TO COVID-19

Similar to many in the U.S., veterans' mental health issues may have worsened during the COVID-19 pandemic. During this time, VA shifted most in-person mental health care to telehealth, including for care by non-VA providers in the community.

In the first 8 months of the pandemic, telehealth visits for mental health increased by over 200 percent and in February 2021, 77 percent of VA mental health visits were telephone or televideo visits.

GAO reported that VA has conducted outreach to increase awareness of telehealth services and purchased tablets to provide veterans with more access to telehealth since March 2020 (GAO-21-265). The Commander John Scott Hannon Veterans Mental Health Care Improvement Act of 2019 (Hannon Act), enacted in October 2020, enables VA to further expand telehealth services in underserved communities by awarding grants to set up additional access points.

Veterans in emotional crisis can get help through the Veterans Crisis Line by calling 1-800-273-8255 and pressing "1" or sending a text message to 838255 to be connected with a responder.

INCREASING VETERAN AWARENESS OF AND ACCESS TO MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES

Veterans may learn about VA mental health care services through a variety of sources including outreach campaigns, referrals from a primary care provider, or by calling the Veterans Crisis Line, a toll-free hotline that supports veterans in emotional crisis.

Yet some veterans may not be aware of mental health benefits available to them, or how to access these services. The Hannon Act requires VA to obtain an evaluation of the effectiveness of its suicide prevention and mental health outreach programs.

Understanding the risk factors and barriers veterans face when seeking mental health services would help VA to improve access to mental health services and reduce veteran suicide (see fig. 2).

POLICY QUESTIONS

1. What actions could VA take to reduce barriers to accessing mental health services?
2. What level of funding is sufficient to meet VA's goals for increasing mental health access and improving outcomes?
3. How does VA envision the role of telehealth in meeting veterans' increasing demand for mental health services?

GAO's future work will continue to address issues such as these.

Figure 2: Considerations and Potential Barriers for Certain Veteran Populations in Accessing Mental Health Care



Source: Department of Agriculture, Bureau of Land Management, Defense Logistics Agency, and Department of Veteran Affairs (VA) (photos); GAO (data). | GAO-21-545SP

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