



Mental Health Association in New York State, Inc.

Glenn Liebman, MA
CEO

Ellen Pendegar, MS, RN
Board Chair

Mental Health Association in New York State, Inc.

Testimony to

Senator David Carlucci, Chairman
Committee on Mental Health and Developmental Disabilities
on
Veterans Mental Health and Well-Being

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Glenn Liebman, CEO

HEALTHY MINDS FOR A HEALTHY NEW YORK

194 Washington Avenue, Suite 415 • Albany, New York 12210-2314
Phone: 518-434-0439 • Fax: 518-427-8676 • MHANYS.org

Thank you to Senator Carlucci and the other members of the committee for their great interest in Veterans Mental Health.

The issue of suicide completion among veterans is one of the great tragedies in our country and we need a strong systemic response to dramatically reduce these numbers. On average, 22 veterans a day complete suicide - that amounts to one every sixty-five minutes.

There are 30 veterans who complete suicide for every 100,000 people compared to 14 for every 100,000 non-veterans. One out of every five suicide completions in the United States is by a veteran, even though they make up only ten percent of our population.

Sadly, the number is probably even larger because it underrepresents those veterans who die from drug overdose, homelessness, and those who complete suicide through car crashes.

What can we do to help the true heroes in our society? We support your leadership in proposed legislation around Problem Solving Courts, periodic review of suicide prevention programs, and Nicole's Law.

We have several recommendations moving forward:

1) Dwyer Peer to Peer Veterans Mental Health Program

We want to first thank Senator Carlucci for being one of the staunchest supporters of the Dwyer veterans funding program.

Several of the Joseph P. Dwyer Veterans Peer Support Project programs are embedded in several of the Mental Health Association in New York State, Inc.'s (MHANYS) affiliate members (MHAs) and it is great honor for us to work in conjunction with such a powerful and courageous group of individuals.

For many returning veterans, re-entry into the community after serving on the front lines is an incredibly difficult adjustment. The underlying stigma of mental health issues remains rampant in society. By their nature, those in the military have to be tough and fearless. Admitting a mental health-related issue to many of them is a sign of weakness.

Every one of us knows it is a far cry from weakness, but it is still a stigma that continues to exist. That is what has been so unique about the Dwyer Peer to Peer Project. There is nothing less stigmatizing to a veteran than talking to another peer. They can talk about the reality of what they are facing without feeling any weakness.

As we know, Dwyer funding is year to year and it makes it difficult for organizations to provide future planning when they don't know from year to year if the program will be funded and at what amount.

Recommendation:

- We urge the Executive to annualize five million dollars in funding in the budget for the Dwyer Project to provide a Dwyer program in every county in the State. The Senate has been our leader in this effort and if you choose to add additional funding then it is at your discretion. This way, with a discreet funding line in the budget, the Dwyer Project can expand throughout the State and develop the long range plans necessary to provide outreach efforts and evaluation of the program.

2) Suicide Prevention: Mental Health First Aid and other Trainings

There are several unique tools around suicide prevention including ASIST, safeTALK, and QPR. All of these trainings are evidence-based and would be well suited for the military.

Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) is a best practice public education tool that provides resources to respond to an individual in a mental health crisis as well as a tool to help end the stigma of mental illness; MHFA is ideal for military personnel. There is a specialized program in MHFA geared to Veterans. This training focuses on the unique experiences and needs of the service members and provides families with the skills needed to reach out and provide initial support to someone who may be developing a mental health or substance use problem and help connect them to appropriate care.

The training is ideal for someone to get a basic understanding of mental health and training on how to respond to a mental health crisis.

Through the leadership of Senator Carlucci, MHANYS received one hundred thousand dollars in the budget to train our affiliates to become mental health first aid trainers. To date, over 1.5 million people across the country have been trained in MHFA. In New York, we have trained thousands of individuals through our statewide network.

We are also recipients of a federal grant covering the Capital District in which we are able to provide free mental health training to individuals who work to support our veterans, older adults, and the general public. Through this grant, we will train over 800 individuals.

Recommendation

- Mental Health First Aid Training should be part of all Dwyer programs. Currently we are working with the Albany and Rensselaer County Dwyer Project to embed in their programs.
- In addition, it should be an essential part of training for the National Guard, VA, Vet Centers, and other facilities with military personnel.
- Families should be included in MHFA training availability as they are on the front line of addressing the issue.

3) Mental Health Education in Schools

Although many high school graduates will pursue college or a vocation after graduation, hundreds of graduates and those with GEDs will enroll in the military, including the National Guard. About 184,000 personnel must be recruited into the Armed Forces every year to replace those who have completed their commitment or retired. All branches of the Armed Forces require members to be high school graduates or have equivalent credentials such as GEDs. Many will be exposed to active duty, combat, and the trauma that accompanies exposure to battle.

Military personnel are challenged mentally and physically with the rigors of training, the demands of military life, and separation from family.

Up until 2018, there were limited means by which a young person could receive mental health instruction in a manner that would prepare them for stress and mental health challenges inherent in military life. A young person headed to combat had limited understanding of mental health disorders such as PTSD, depression, and where and how to get help.

In 2016, with the strong support of Senator Carlucci and other members of the Committee, the Senate passed the mental health education law. It passed the Assembly as well and was signed into law by Governor Cuomo. With funding from the Legislature and the Governor, the MHANYS School Mental Health Resource and Training Center was developed. The Resource Center works with schools across New York State to provide technical support, curriculum development, and resources for students, teachers, and families. To date, over seventy percent of public schools in New York have worked with the Center.

The sustainability of the Resource Center is vital to the new calling that schools have to teach young people about mental health. Arguably, few young people will need this type of lifesaving instruction more immediately than those who will experience military life before their twentieth birthday. One of the greatest hedges of protection for military personnel against substance misuse, untreated mental illness, and suicide completion is mental health literacy.

Recommendation:

- MHANYS recommends continued support of the Resource Center so that schools will have the tools and support they need to teach youth about mental health and suicide.

4) Family Engagement

Several years ago, MHANYS had a grant to provide support and engagement for military families in three counties throughout New York State. We learned many lessons from that grant.

The lessons we learned were the impetus for MHANYS to create a whole health family engagement tool referred to as CarePath™. CarePath™ is a transition support tool for individuals and their families for the first 90-days of transition from any type of treatment setting or a recent setback. CarePath™ supports healthy reconnections among family, friends, and within the community for jobs, schools, or other associations.

A CarePath™ Coach can provide support to veterans to design their own path to better overall health and wellness. Many veterans benefit from the support of a professional who can work closely with them in the recovery process and educate the family on whole-family health and wellness. A CarePath™ Coach can support Veterans and their family members, including their children, in solution-focused goals and introduce wellness tools that endorse better overall health.

To date, MHANYS has trained over one hundred CarePath™ Coaches including several in Rockland and Westchester Counties.

Recommendation:

- Urge Support for the Dwyer Project to include a CarePath™ whole family support training tool for veterans and their families.

Summary:

We thank Senator Carlucci for the opportunity to provide testimony today. We appreciate all you are doing for veterans' mental health in New York State.

In order to continue to support our true heroes in society, we support the following measures:

- Continued support for legislation introduced by Senator Carlucci including periodic review of suicide prevention programs, to provide intake and procedures for discharge for life threatening injuries (Nicole's Law), and Problem Solving Courts.
- Move the Dwyer funding to the Executive Budget and include added funding support from the Legislature to help support all regions in New York State.
- Add Mental Health First Aid to all the Dwyer Projects and insure that Mental Health First Aid training be mandatory for all National Guard, Veterans Administration hospitals, vet centers, and other facilities for military personnel in New York State. Families should be included as well in the training.
- Support the addition of \$500,000 in the budget for funding for the School Mental Health Resource and Training Center to help provide a greater understanding of mental health to high school students graduating and transitioning to the military.
- Insure that the Dwyer Project includes the CarePath™ Whole Health Family Engagement Tool.