Licensed Professional Counselors Continue to be Shut Out of the VA

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) is failing to adequately provide mental health services to veterans, as shown by the fact that a veteran commits suicide every 80 minutes, on average. In April of 2012, the VA’s Office of the Inspector General (OIG) found that the VA is grossly misrepresenting how quickly veterans are able to receive a mental health evaluation. While the VA claimed that 95% of veterans were being evaluated within 14 days, the OIG investigation found that this was only true for about half of veterans; the other half waited about 50 days—almost two months—to obtain an evaluation. The OIG report showed similar problems with the VA’s claimed ‘success rate’ for scheduling follow-up treatment appointments when requested. Although the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) increased mental health services staff by 46% between 2005 and 2010, the OIG surveyed VHA clinicians and found that they still don’t think there are enough providers to meet the demand for services.

There is a large, untapped pool of highly-qualified mental health professionals ready to be enlisted to help provide services to veterans. Nationwide, there are more than 120,000 professional counselors licensed for mental health practice across the country, meeting education and training requirements on par with or more stringent than those of other master’s level mental health professionals, such as clinical social workers and marriage and family therapists. Licensed professional counselors must have a master’s degree in counseling, pass a national exam, accumulate thousands of hours of post-master’s supervision, and adhere to a strict code of ethics.

In December of 2006, Congress and the President enacted legislation explicitly recognizing licensed professional mental health counselors as clinicians within VA facilities (P.L. 109-461). Almost four years later, the VA adopted an occupational standard for “licensed professional mental health counselors” (LPMHC) within the VA. Two years after the standard was adopted, and going on nearly six years after the enactment of P.L. 109-461, licensed professional counselors are still being largely shut out of the VA mental health workforce. This deprives veterans of access to the best possible pool of highly qualified mental health providers. For the first six months of 2012, the VA only posted 49 positions for licensed professional mental health counselors nationwide; during this time, the VA posted 940 mental health clinician positions as open only to social workers.

Congress Needs to Help

Unfortunately, it is clear that the VA will not take adequate steps to incorporate licensed professional counselors into its workforce unless Congress exerts pressure. Both inside the beltway and out in the district, members of Congress can take specific steps to push the VA to begin bringing counselors on board in significant numbers:

1) Ask the VA’s Office of Academic Affiliations to include counselors in its paid trainee program. Currently, the office only offers positions in this program to psychologists, psychiatrists and social workers, but counselors are shut out. These positions are a well-trod pathway to careers within the VA, and counselors are being unfairly and arbitrarily discriminated against by being excluded from the program.

2) Tell the VA to work with ACA and other groups to help fill the 3,100 vacancies in the VA. ACA has a national network and an office of professional affairs that can help find applicants for these positions. We are ready to help, but we have to be called off the bench.
3) Identify a point-person in your district office to work with your constituents who are being denied employment in the VA. All too often ACA hears stories from counselors like “The local VA said they knew the law was there but said they would not hire counselors.” Congress gave a clear mandate to the VA by passing the original legislation, and the VA needs to follow the law!

4) Congress should ask VA Secretary Eric Shinseki to issue a public notice to the entire VA healthcare system reminding them that they are empowered to hire counselors, and asking them not to shut-out an entire profession that can provide desperately needed help to our vets.

5) Ask the VA to adopt “grandfathering” provisions to expand eligibility for LPMHC positions.

What Counselors Are Hearing From the VA

“I am a veteran who has been identified by the VA as 60% disabled due to injuries (non-combat related) sustained while I was a young officer in the U.S. Army at the Sixth Army Training Station, Fort Ord, California. About five years ago, I had occasion to ask for mental health counseling at the VA. I was assigned to a social worker who decided after two brief "counseling" sessions that she no longer needed to see me.

I am fearful for my fellow veterans who are in need of professionally rendered mental health counseling by licensed mental health counselor but are not receiving these services. PTSD is a major mental health issue and because the VA has dragged its feet in hiring licensed mental health counselors, my brothers and sisters in arms are suffering needlessly.”

---Andrew, NY

“I have a Masters in Mental Health Counseling, and I recently applied for a "Clinical Mental Health Social Worker" position at my local VA. I sent in all kinds of letters explaining the parity of my degree, and how my training is actually specific to mental health. I was deemed "not eligible" and told it was because I had the wrong degree."

---Colleen, CA

“I want to apply for the position "Licensed Professional Mental Health Counselor - LPMHC)" in Tampa, FL. I am already a Licensed Mental Health Counselor (LMHC) in the state of Florida, with a master's degree in Mental Health Counseling from Nova Southeastern University (1998). I have maintained an up to date license to practice independently since 2001. I successfully passed the National Counselor's Exam and have held the NCC credential since 2002. What else do I need to do? Do I really need to start over and obtain a second license in order to apply for this job? ”

---Lori, FL

“I am a Service Connected (10%) VETERAN who was married for 15 years to a Combat Veteran (Fighter Pilot). I earned my Master’s Degree plus 30 by using my GI BILL and it was earned on a MILITARY BASE from Louisiana Tech University. The qualification standards have given no consideration for grandfathering, waiver nor equivalency and thus has effectively ENDED my future with the VA in my chosen career field, based on a school’s accreditation alone. Despite graduating from a Non-CACREP school, I have become a Licensed Professional Counselor, A Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist, A Licensed Addiction Counselor and have become a Nationally Certified Counselor (which does conduct a CACREP equivalency prior to awarding Certification). So, basically while “we” continue to support our Veterans-I, as a Veteran, am being robbed of years of hard earned efforts to continue service. And with the state of mental health and its shortages, who is better qualified to treat Veterans than a Veteran with experience both in the military and as a spouse.”

---Kathryn, LA