

May 25, 2010

Dear Representative _____,

I write you today as a licensed mental health counselor eager to expand our soldiers' access, and the access of soldiers' dependents, to the outpatient services my colleagues and I provide.

In late October 2009, Representatives Rooney and McMahon introduced H.R. 3839, the CARES Act. If enacted into law, H.R. 3839 would allow all TRICARE beneficiaries, thus soldiers and their dependents, unimpeded access to licensed mental health counselors' outpatient mental health services. Currently, TRICARE requires its beneficiaries to seek primary care physician supervision and referral before being able to see a licensed mental health counselor.

TRICARE's mental health counselor physician supervision and referral requirement is an unnecessary and antiquated impediment. Licensed mental health counselors are a recognized mental health profession which has achieved licensure in every state and the District of Columbia. Like licensed clinical social workers and licensed marriage and family therapists who can see TRICARE beneficiaries without the additional obstacle of receiving primary physician supervision and referral, licensed mental health counselors have obtained a minimum of a Master's degree, passed a national clinical examination, demonstrated satisfaction of ethical standards, and completed 3,000 plus hours of clinical training, including supervised one on one interactions with persons seeking diagnosis and treatment of mental and emotional disorders. In a recently released IOM report titled "Provision of Mental Health Counseling Services under TRICARE," a panel comprised of reputable psychiatrists, psychologists, social workers, and mental health counselors found licensed mental health counselors should be able to independently serve TRICARE beneficiaries.

The grim statistics coloring the mental health of today's soldiers and their dependents alone make the case for TRICARE beneficiaries to be afforded more immediate access to licensed mental health counselors. Over twenty percent of soldiers returning from Iraq and Afghanistan experience post traumatic stress disorder, depression, or anxiety. For the past three years, the U.S. Army has recorded record high incidents of suicide. Divorce rates and domestic abuse statistics among America's military families have escalated with the onset of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars.

H.R. 3839 strips TRICARE of an antiquated requirement which only hinders TRICARE beneficiaries' access to skilled outpatient mental health professionals. In many rural communities, licensed mental health counselors are the only persons providing TRICARE outpatient mental health services. The current supervision and referral requirement further impedes these beneficiaries' access to care by mandating they first seek care from a primary care physician, whether or not that physician even has any background or expertise in delivering mental health services. For many persons, access to a primary care physician may mean driving an extra 20-100 miles down the road.

My experience with TRICARE has been._____. H.R. 3839 would help me as well as my colleagues give TRICARE beneficiaries more immediate access to outpatient mental health services, before these beneficiaries' more mild and moderate mental and emotional health disorders exacerbate into more serious and costly psychiatric disorders, thus necessitating a psychiatrist's attention. I ask that you support soldiers and their families' need for more accessible outpatient mental health services by signing on as a cosponsor to H.R. 3839, the CARES Act.

Sincerely,