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Veterans' health care needs

Yesterday was Veterans' Day in the US, a time when the nation pauses to honour and remember its veterans. President Obama traveled to Arlington National Cemetery to place a wreath on the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier and made an unexpected visit to the special area reserved for the fallen in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. This year's anniversary carried special meaning as the nation is still reeling from the brutal attack at Fort Hood.

This tragedy highlights some of the serious issues facing veterans, especially in terms of physical and mental trauma and access to needed health care services.

A recent report

(http://www.cha.harvard.edu/news/press_releases_07/071030_veteranshealth.shtml) from Harvard Medical School found that at least 1.46 million veterans between the ages of 18 and 64 went without insurance in 2008, and over 2,200 veterans died last year because they lacked insurance. That's six preventable deaths per day.

While most are eligible to receive care from the Veterans Administration (VA), a 2003 Bush administration decision excluded many veterans from care. As authors of the Harvard study noted, uninsured veterans are "like other uninsured Americans": working people who are "too poor to afford private coverage but not poor enough to qualify for Medicaid or means-tested VA care."

The fact that the alleged Fort Hood shooter was a psychiatrist has brought to light the distressing mental health issues facing many veterans of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. One of every three US soldiers who returns from active duty in Iraq needs mental health treatment, and one in five veterans from these recent conflicts suffers from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Suicides among active-duty soldiers are at a 30-year high and at Fort Hood, ten soldiers have taken their lives so far this year.

The VA estimates that 131,000 veterans are homeless on any given night, and approximately twice that many experience homelessness over the course of a year. Conservatively, one out of every three homeless men who is sleeping in a doorway, alley or box in America's cities and rural communities has put on a uniform and served their country. The vast majority of these people are single, from poor, disadvantaged communities, 45 percent suffer from mental illness, and half have substance abuse problems.

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The Bush administration cut benefits to veterans in many areas, even as it ramped up the war in Iraq. In addition to excluding some vets from VA care, the conservative-led Congress in 2006 cut funding for the Defense and Veterans Brain Injury Center, which plays a critical role in treating mental health issues that result from brain injuries. The Bush VA also tried to cover-up the fact that 1,000 vets were attempting suicide every month, and it urged doctors to fudge diagnoses so fewer vets would qualify for PTSD treatment. A number of high-ranking VA officials were forced to resign when these issues and stories about poor treatment and conditions at the Walter Reed Army Hospital became public last year.

More recently, Sen. Tom Coburn (R-OK) put a hold on a major veterans' health benefit bill to make a political point about the economic recovery plan, drawing heat from at least 13 major military and veterans groups.

President Obama and his new head of the VA, General Eric Shinseki, have moved to restore what Obama has called "the sacred trust" with veterans. The Obama administration has made strides to once-again make all veterans eligible for care, addressed the VA's health care budget needs, made the treatment of PTSD a top priority, and launched a major push to tackle homelessness. Last June, Obama signed into law a new GI bill that provides the most comprehensive educational benefit package since the first GI bill passed in 1944, and to help veterans return to civilian life, Obama yesterday announced a major new employment program that will help them secure jobs in federal agencies.