

Washington, DC – Reps. Tom Rooney and Michael E. McMahon have called for an increase in mental health funding in the FY 2010 budget for the Department of Defense. This request is in support of the funding levels recommended by Defense Secretary Robert Gates in April, but obviously has taken on new importance given the tragic events that occurred yesterday at Camp Liberty in Iraq. Combat stress has been a growing issue for military leaders and families as fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan has taken its toll on the soldiers, many of whom have been deployed three, four, or even five times.

This bipartisan letter request comes at a time when 2008 reported the highest level of army suicide within the military since 1980. And with the onslaught of returning service members, 2009's army suicide rate is projected to further surpass the 2008 level. Yesterday's shootings at Camp Liberty of five of our nation's heroes cannot be repeated. This increase in funding for mental health programs along with a comprehensive post-deployment program to psychologically screen all of our service men and women will go a long way to protecting our returning veterans. This increase in funding would make it possible for our newly returning service men and women to take care of their physical as well as psychological injuries through a program of mental health assessments and treatments.

Reps. McMahon and Rooney, along with almost fifty of their colleagues in the House, will be sending a letter to Subcommittee on Defense Chairman John Murtha and Ranking Member Bill Young tomorrow urging the Appropriations Defense Subcommittee to increase overall funding for mental health programs by \$300 million in the FY10 defense budget. Defense Secretary Robert Gates recommended this figure along with spending over \$47 billion on healthcare on April 6, 2009.

Reps. McMahon and Rooney, along with Rep. Thomas Perriello, also recently joined together to introduce H.R. 1308, the Veterans Mental Health Screening and Assessment Act of 2009, which will require mandatory, confidential mental health screenings for deploying service members.

"The mental health of our soldiers and Veterans has been of great importance to me for many years," said Rep. Michael E. McMahon. "After thousands of brave men and women were sent to war after the tragic events of 9/11, which directly impacted my district, I have felt the overwhelming need to fight for better rights for our service men and women and our returning Veterans. If we do not provide adequate mental health care to our soldiers and Veterans we are failing the very people who have never let us down."

“Every month we hear different stories about incidents involving service members who have recently returned from battle, incidents that could be avoided with better screening,” said Rep. Tom Rooney (R-FL). “I am happy we can all come together in a bi-partisan manner to address the mental health problems facing so many of our war fighters as they return home from Iraq and Afghanistan. We need to make sure the Department of Defense has the necessary resources to address this growing problem and soldiers are able to get the necessary help they deserve.”

Below please find the text of the letter being sent to Chairman John Murtha and Ranking Member Bill Young.

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The Honorable John Murtha
Chairman, Subcommittee on Defense

The Honorable C.W. “Bill” Young
Ranking Member, Subcommittee on Defense

Dear Chairman and Ranking Member:

As you begin developing the United States Department of Defense budget for FY10 we are writing in strong support of Secretary Gates’ recommendation to increase funding for “wounded, ill and injured, traumatic brain injury, and psychological health programs” in the FY10 defense budget. As the prevalence of suicide amongst service men and women has rapidly been increasing through the years, with 2008 reporting the highest level of army suicide within the military since 1980, we firmly stand by Secretary Gate’s efforts to aggressively address and combat this dreadful trend.

The previous statistics prove the military’s dire need to overcome its dangerous shortage of mental health professionals. Secretary Gates’ recommendation to increase overall spending to fund these efforts by \$300 million can create incentives for mental health professional to join and stay in the military. This increase in funding can also serve to make mental healthcare more accessible and inevitably, reduce the stigma behind seeking help for mental injuries while in the military.

We firmly believe that every soldier being discharged from the battle fields of Iraq and Afghanistan should have an exit interview with a licensed mental health professional. But, at this time, it is crucial that our service men and women who have fought in Iraq and Afghanistan come home and get the care and benefits they have duly earned. In fact, President Barack

Obama's recent announcement to advance VA funding and overhaul the transition process from military to VA echoes this call and complements Secretary Gates' suggestions to spend over \$47 billion on healthcare in FY10.

Once again, we firmly support Secretary Gates' funding priorities to fight the phenomenon of military suicides that will inevitably grow if not dealt with immediately. We urge you to fully fund Secretary Gates' request to increase overall funding for mental health programs by \$300 million in the FY10 defense budget.

We appreciate your attention to this matter and welcome the opportunity to work with you to innovate, develop and support these initiatives in FY 10 and for years to come.

Sincerely,

Rep. Michael E. McMahon

Rep. Thomas J. Rooney

Cosigners:

Rep. Joe Baca

Rep. Howard Berman

Rep. Madeleine Bordallo

Rep. Leonard Boswell

Rep. Robert Brady

Rep. Christopher P. Carney

Rep. Yvette D. Clarke

Rep. Gerald E. Connolly

Rep. John Conyers, Jr.

Rep. Joe Donnelly

Rep. Bob Filner

Rep. Gabrielle Giffords

Rep. Charlie A. Gonzalez

Rep. Bart Gordon

Rep. Al Green

Rep. Luis Gutierrez

Rep. John J. Hall

Rep. Alcee L. Hastings

Rep. Eddie Bernice Johnson

Rep. Frank M. Kratovil, Jr.

Rep. Christopher J. Lee

Rep. Ben R. Luján

Rep. Daniel B. Maffei

Rep. Carolyn McCarthy

Rep. James McGovern

Rep. Kendrick Meek

Rep. Walt Minnick

Rep. Harry E. Mitchell

Rep. Dennis Moore

Rep. Grace Napolitano
Rep. Glenn C. Nye III
Rep. James L. Oberstar
Rep. Silvestre Reyes
Rep. Ciro Rodriguez
Rep. Bobby L. Rush
Del. Gregorio Sablan
Rep. Loretta Sanchez
Rep. Jan Schakowsky
Rep. Adam Schiff
Rep. Carol Shea-Porter
Rep. John Spratt
Rep. Gene Taylor
Rep. Henry Waxman
Rep. David Wu