

Amendment Continues Freshmen Lawmakers' Work to Address  
Mental Health Issues Burdening our Service Members and Veterans

**Washington, DC** - Reps. Michael E. McMahon (D-NY) and Thomas J. Rooney (R-FL) cosponsored an amendment to HR 5136, the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA), urging Defense Secretary Robert Gates to expand the Department of Defense's (DOD) Mental Health Care Force by including licensed counselors under its TRICARE program. The McMahon/Rooney amendment passed the House tonight by voice vote. With tomorrow's final passage of the NDAA, this amendment will mark another major victory in their joint crusade to increase mental health funding and options for our service members and veterans.

"One-on-one screenings are key to providing adequate mental health services to our brave men and women in uniform," **said Rep. McMahon**. "By allowing licensed counselors to practice under its TRICARE program, the Department of Defense will be expanding the quality and quantity of services it can provide to our service men and women. Licensed counselors could be offering excellent care if the current TRICARE policy were changed. Given the alarmingly high number of suicides among our returning service members, this is clearly a necessity. Rep. Rooney and I are committed to this cause. We will not stop until we make mental health services more accessible."

"Thousands of our troops and their families will benefit from these reforms for mental health services," **Rep. Rooney said**. "Ending the Department's policy of requiring referrals to see licensed counselors will encourage more personnel to seek mental health services. Streamlining this process will make it easier for our troops and returning veterans to get the care they need, when they need it. I would like to thank Rep. McMahon for his tireless dedication to this issue, and I will continue to work with him and Secretary Gates to address the mental health needs of our men and women in uniform."

Reps. McMahon and Rooney have been working together to expand access to mental health services since they came to Congress in January 2009. Under last year's Defense Authorization Act, they secured language to provide all returning service men and women with one-to-one confidential screenings with a mental health professional.

Despite this successful step towards addressing the growing rates in suicide, however, the national shortage of mental health service providers coupled with stringent DOD requirements made the implementation of these one-to-one screenings near impossible.

Realizing that the DOD would need more mental health care professionals to achieve their goal, the freshmen lawmakers introduced tonight's amendment relying on a report from the Institute of Medicine (IOM), which had convened a committee to examine the credentials, preparation and training of licensed mental health counselors.

In this report, which was sponsored by the DOD, the IOM committee recommended that counselors be permitted to practice independently under the TRICARE program. IOM's

recommendation would greatly increase the mental health staff working with the DOD to better serve our service men and women. In addition, the IOM committee recommended that TRICARE implement a comprehensive quality management system for all of its mental health professionals.

Licensed mental health counselors - like clinical social workers, marriage and family therapists and psychiatric nurse specialist - typically hold masters degrees and are obligated by state licensure and other requirements to have demonstrated clinical experience in order to practice. Under current TRICARE rules, mental health counselors are required to practice under a physician's supervision and their patients must be referred to them by a physician in order for their services to be eligible for reimbursement. This requirement not only makes it difficult for licensed counselors to treat our men and women in uniform, it unnecessarily deprives our service men and women and veterans from an entire population of professionals who could provide them with critical services.

By urging Secretary Gates to include licensed counselors under TRICARE, McMahon and Rooney's goal of providing one-to-one screenings for all returning service men and women can become a reality. As with all McMahon/Rooney collaborations, tonight's amendment aims to reduce the horrifying rise in suicide rates among our returning service men and women and veterans.

The McMahon/Rooney amendment urges Secretary Gates to comply with the IOM recommendations by December 31, 2010.

Click below for a fact sheet detailing Reps. McMahon and Rooney 's work on behalf of our brave men and women serving in the Armed Forces and our veterans: