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By U.S. Rep Tom Rooney

This week, the U.S. Army reported more sobering news in the fight against mental illness and suicide among our troops and veterans. From 2009 to 2010, while suicides among active-duty troops dropped slightly from 162 to 156, suicides among reservists and guardsmen spiked from 80 to 145.

Every month, we hear tragic stories of veterans and service members who are struggling with such invisible wounds as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), traumatic brain injury (TBI) and depression. This month, The Post carried "Warning signs preceded soldier's lonely death in SUV," about a suicide in Afghanistan. By some estimates, 20 percent of the more than 2.5 million men and women who have served in Iraq and Afghanistan suffer from PTSD, and the armed services and veterans communities are reporting the highest rates of suicides in decades.

While the Pentagon has made significant strides in addressing mental-health issues, we must do much more. Eliminating the stigma, identifying invisible wounds before they fester and providing access to mental-health professionals are critical in ending this national tragedy.

Face-to-face counseling is critical to treating invisible wounds and preventing suicides, but one-on-one counseling would stretch the Defense Department's thin staff of mental-health professionals. More than 110,000 licensed counselors across the country could serve troops and veterans, but red tape prevents many TRICARE beneficiaries from seeing these professionals. Under TRICARE law, a beneficiary must receive a referral from a TRICARE provider before seeing a licensed mental-health counselor. This unnecessary requirement prevents many troops and veterans from receiving care.

To tear down these barriers, I reintroduced the Counselor Accessibility Reform and Expansion for Soldiers (CARES) Act as my first bill of the 112th Congress. My friend U.S. Rep. Larry Kissell, D-N.C., is an original co-sponsor. The CARES Act would ensure that anyone covered under the TRICARE program could receive mental health services, by allowing all beneficiaries direct access to licensed counselors without requiring referrals or supervision. Eliminating the outdated and cumbersome referral and supervision requirements would increase accessibility

to mental health professionals for all TRICARE beneficiaries.

Simply put, streamlining this process will make it easier for our troops and veterans to get the care they need, when they need it. We owe it to our troops and veterans to take this step toward addressing the rise in invisible wounds and suicides in our military.

U.S. REP. TOM ROONEY

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Editor's note: Tom Rooney represents Florida's 16th Congressional District. A former member of the Army JAG Corps, Rep. Rooney serves on the House Armed Services Committee.

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