

Healing the Wounds of War

Schumer bill would ease eligibility for post-traumatic stress disorder treatment

Federal legislation introduced Wednesday aims to make it easier for service members and veterans diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder to get treatment.

Presently, any veteran who suffers PTSD through "combat with the enemy" can apply for disability compensation and receive paid care beyond five years from their deployment. But service members who suffer the mental health illness in a war zone, but not in combat, must satisfy a series of rigorous conditions — including assembling incident reports and statements from friends — to get the same benefits.

Sen. Charles Schumer wants to change that through the Combat PTSD Act, which would expand the definition of "combat with the enemy" to the more broad "service in combat."

The senior New York Democrat said the present requirements prevent many service members from receiving care for PTSD, a condition that can mimic anxiety and depression and lead to violence, substance abuse and other problems.

Citing a Rand Corporation study, Schumer said an estimated 360,000 American troops, including 12,000 from upstate, have suffered trauma or stress in Iraq and Afghanistan. Of those, about half sought treatment and only 25 percent received care, Schumer said.

"In an era where mental injuries are stigmatized and in a war where danger can strike in any place, it is clear that the current VA regulations are in need of change," he said.

The legislation would apply to veterans of all U.S. conflicts. Congressman John Hall, a Dutchess County Democrat, has introduced companion legislation in the House. The program would cost about \$500 million a year over the next 10 years but would pay for itself in two years through health care savings and more, Schumer said.

The legislation makes sense, said Mathew Tully, an Army veteran and Colonie attorney. There were a lot of truck drivers and cooks in the military who actually served in combat jobs in the Middle East, and they deserve the same opportunity to receive care, he said.

"If you have PTSD, you don't want to re-hash how you were in danger," Tully said. All veterans who serve in a combat zone are entitled to five years of post-deployment care from the VA, he said.

New York has the fourth largest veteran population in the country and has sent more than 70,000 troops to Iraq and Afghanistan. There are 82,250 veterans living in the Capital Region, approximately 5,700 of which served in Iraq or Afghanistan. About 900 Capital Region service members currently are deployed in Iraq and Afghanistan.