

VA expands mental health care for discharged veterans

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WASHINGTON – The Department of Veterans Affairs will offer urgent mental health care beginning this summer to thousands of former service members with less-than-honorable discharges, part of its expanded initiative to stem stubbornly high rates of suicide.

VA Secretary David Shulkin said Wednesday the additional coverage was needed to help former service members who are more likely to have mental health distress. He said the department couldn't wait for legislation and needed to act now, noting that the vast majority of veterans who took their lives had not been connected to VA care.

"This is a national emergency that requires bold action," Shulkin said. "Far too many veterans have fallen victim to suicide, roughly 20 every day."

By June or July, the VA said it will specifically provide the mental health care to those with "other than honorable" discharges from the military, typically for misconduct such as violence or use of illegal drugs. Currently, such discharges can prevent veterans from receiving federal benefits.

VA Secretary David Shulkin: Our plan to deliver greater accountability to America's veterans
At VA hospital, anguished veterans wait hours to see doctors
Shulkin, who has called suicide prevention a top priority, said the VA also would begin to see the former service members right away at VA emergency departments if they urgently need it. The VA is also seeking to hire 1,000 more mental health providers and establish strong hubs to reach veterans with mental health assistance by phone in rural parts of the country.

While details are being finalized, the VA said it hopes to provide expanded counseling services as well at its Vet Centers and via its Veterans Crisis Line at 800-273-8255.

According to the VA, as many as 500,000 former service members have "other than honorable" discharges, although the department believes a smaller number at risk of suicide will seek urgent treatment. The Army has dismissed at least 22,000 combat veterans diagnosed with mental health disabilities or traumatic brain injury for alleged misconduct since 2009.

Shulkin pointed to legislation introduced by Rep. Mike Coffman, R-Colo., that would expand coverage for veterans with less than honorable discharges as an impetus for VA's action. On Wednesday, Coffman said he welcomed the news and would continue to move forward on the bill with Rep. Derek Kilmer, D-Wash., to make the VA coverage broader and more permanent.

Shulkin first announced the expanded coverage Tuesday night at a House hearing, which drew loud applause from veterans groups in attendance.

"This is fantastic news and a major win," said Paul Rieckhoff, founder and CEO of Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America. "This policy change will forever alter the future for thousands of veterans and their families. It's an outstanding move by the new VA secretary."