

Bipartisan amendment improves mental health treatment & support services for returning vets

Washington, DC —Today, Reps. Steve Israel (D – NY) and Peter King (R-NY) announced that their amendment to launch a pilot program to better coordinate the research, treatment, education, and outreach of mental health, substance use disorders, and traumatic brain injury (TBI) among members of the National Guard, Reserves and their families is included in the conference report of the FY13 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA). This week, the conference report was finalized by members of the House and the Senate conference committee. The FY13 NDAA bill passed the House last night by a vote of 315 to 107. With the Senate's approval, it will go to the President's desk for his signature to become enacted into law and authorize all defense programs for the year.

Rep. Israel said, "I'm proud that Rep. King and I were able to work together to improve mental health treatment options for our returning vets by spurring partnerships between private, non-profit institutions and the Department of Defense. We need all hands on deck to meet the needs of our returning veterans who deserve the best care available. With innovative partnerships, we can better meet the growing needs of returning veterans from Iraq and Afghanistan. We cannot afford to repeat the mistakes that we made in Vietnam when the Veterans Administration didn't have the resources needed to take care of our veterans. That is simply unacceptable."

Rep King said, "It is imperative that our military receive the best treatment available. I am proud to have worked with Rep. Israel on this amendment which will go a long way to ensure that the support system our returning troops need is accessible to them when they need it the most."

The bi-partisan Israel-King amendment allows the Secretary of Defense to carry out a pilot program to competitively award grants to community partners that engage in research, treatment, education, and outreach activities for TBI, mental health, and substance abuse disorders among our brave National Guard and Reserve members. Before completing the pilot program, the amendment requires the Secretary of Defense to submit to Congress and the Secretary of Veterans Affairs a report on the pilot program, including the number of members of the National Guard and Reserves provided treatment or services by community partners, and an assessment of the effectiveness of the pilot program as it relates to research, treatment, education, and outreach on mental health and substance use disorders and traumatic brain injury.

According to a Pentagon report, mental health issues are the top reason for hospital visits by men in the Armed Forces and the second reason among women. And tragically, an American veteran commits suicide every 80 minutes. Suicide is often linked to Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, often seen as the final consequence of not diagnosing and treating PTSD properly. Though the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have relied heavily on members of the National Guard and Reserve, they often return home to communities without the same resources available to those located near major military installations.