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Commentary

Veterans need mental health help

By **STATE REP. SID MILLER**
Houston Chronicle

"All we can ever do for our heroes is to remember them and remember what they did-and memories are transmitted through both words and deeds."

-President Ronald Wilson Reagan

I have the great honor and privilege of representing Fort Hood in the Texas House of Representatives and being the legislative voice in Austin for tens of thousands of brave soldiers who call the post home. Month in and month out, thousands of soldiers pass through Fort Hood on their way to Iraq, Afghanistan and other hot spots around the globe, and thousands more return before ending their service to our nation. We owe these returning veterans our thanks and heartfelt admiration for their dedicated service. And, as President Reagan said, we owe them more than just words. We also owe them deeds.

To that end, during the last session of the Texas Legislature, my colleagues and I appropriated some \$1.2 million to expand mental health treatment services for veterans and their families. On Veterans Day last year, Gov. Rick Perry announced an additional \$5 million allocation to enhance these services, making a total investment of \$6.2 million and highlighting the importance of providing effective and timely mental health services to our returning veterans.

According to the Texas Department of State Health Services, there are some 230,000 Texans on active duty in Iraq and Afghanistan and the state has the third largest population of veterans in the nation. A 2008 RAND Corp. study found that nearly one-third of service members returning from Afghanistan or Iraq are affected by post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), major depression or traumatic brain injury.

Service gaps remain a serious concern as demand for veterans' mental health services outpaces available resources. The Government Accountability Office estimated that four of five service

members returning from duty in Iraq or Afghanistan are at risk but not referred for further evaluation for mental health conditions. According to the National Institute of Mental Health, some 70 percent of returning servicemen and servicewomen with PTSD will not seek treatment from the Department of Defense or Veterans Affairs.

Texas has a valuable ally in the delivery of mental health services to veterans in our community Mental Health and Mental Retardation centers. Working with our state's veterans and their families at home in their communities, the dedicated and professional staff of our state's 39 MHMR centers helps supplement the mental health services provided by the Department of Veterans Affairs and others to create a comprehensive network of care for those who have risked all in the defense of our nation. These community centers are conveniently located throughout Texas and allow veterans and their family members the opportunity to receive the care and support they need without lengthy travel or having to miss work. This mental health service partnership has become a model for other states.

All Texans should take great pride in the way Texas has stepped up and supported our returning veterans, and we should look for ways to strengthen and expand this valuable program.

Unfortunately, with the state's expected budget shortfall — estimated by some to be upward of \$20 billion or more - this innovative community partnership may face budget cuts that could put at risk the mental health needs of Texans who have honorably served our nation.

As we prepare for the 82nd Texas Legislature and its unique budgetary challenges, I will be asking my fellow lawmakers to pay special care in preserving funding for these vital mental health services. Not just because they provide taxpayers with a strong return on their investment, but more importantly because it is simply the right thing to do.

Miller represents Texas House District 59.