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September 20, 2010

The Wars' Continuing Toll

The United States military has never been better at helping soldiers survive the battlefield with sophisticated advances in treatment and transportation. Service members who come home with psychic wounds and hidden traumas are still not getting enough support.

Last year, there were 239 suicides among active-duty personnel across the Army, and more than 1,700 attempts. There were 32 suicides in June, a grim high. Nobody is exactly sure how many veterans take their own lives, but the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimate that veterans make up about 20 percent of the more than 30,000 suicides each year.

The military is becoming more aware of the problem. At an event dedicated to suicide prevention this month, Health and Human Services Secretary Kathleen Sebelius was joined by Defense Secretary Robert Gates, who acknowledged the toll the epidemic has taken.

The causes of suicide can be mysterious and solutions elusive. But advocates for troubled soldiers say the military can save more lives by acknowledging that it is overmatched and directing more people to outside help.

Linda Bean, whose son Coleman committed suicide in 2008, four months after ending his second tour in Iraq, has testified to Congress and pleaded with the Veterans Affairs Department to deepen and widen its outreach.

Many soldiers don't live near a veterans' hospital, she said. Many are hard pressed to leave jobs and families to make mental-health appointments. Soldierly reticence is a huge problem. Before Mr. Bean's second deployment, he received a diagnosis of post-traumatic stress disorder from doctors at the Veterans Affairs Department. The Army didn't know, and Coleman didn't tell his superiors.

Ms. Bean points to nonprofit groups like Give an Hour and the Soldiers Project, which provide confidential counseling, and the National Veterans Foundation, which runs a hot line staffed by trained veterans. She sees hope, too, in small peer groups, like Vets 4 Vets, an Arizona-based organization that organizes weekends for veterans of Afghanistan and Iraq.

The military and the Veterans Affairs Department have been adding mental-health staffing and studying the suicide problem. But they still need to plug gaps in care for people who shun or live far away from government services. Ms. Bean's family was also among the many that sent body armor to undersupplied troops. They learned that when the official program isn't working, you improvise.