



OFFICE OF THE GOVERNOR

NEWS

ROD R. BLAGOJEVICH – GOVERNOR

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Gov. Blagojevich launches first in the nation Traumatic Brain Injury and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder program for Illinois Veterans

Illinois Warriors Assistance Program includes TBI screenings and 24-hour toll-free helpline at 1-866-554-IWAP (4927) for Veterans suffering from symptoms associated with PTSD

CHICAGO – Governor Rod R. Blagojevich was joined today by Director of the Illinois Department of Veterans' Affairs (IDVA) Tammy Duckworth, Director of the Illinois Healthcare and Family Services Barry Maram, representatives from the Illinois Psychiatric Society, the Brain Injury Association of Illinois, the Rehabilitation Institute of Chicago, and local veterans to launch the Illinois Warrior Assistance Program. The Illinois Warrior Assistance Program is a first in the nation program that will screen returning Illinois National Guard members for a traumatic brain injury (TBI) while offering TBI screening to all Illinois veterans, and a 24-hour toll-free psychological helpline for veterans suffering from symptoms associated with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

Beginning today, the new Illinois Warrior Assistance Program confidential helpline, 1-866-554-IWAP (4927), will be available and staffed around the clock by health professionals to assist veterans, day or night, with the symptoms associated with PTSD and to screen for a possible TBI. Information about the program can also be found at www.illinoiswarrior.com.

“The brave men and women serving in Iraq and Afghanistan have made major sacrifices on our behalf and we’ve been seeing what a serious toll combat can take on their health. There is no safe place in these combat zones – only danger, violence and tragedy that most of us can’t even imagine. When they return home, our service members deserve every opportunity to live healthy, stable lives and the Illinois Warrior Assistance Program will help them make the transition from their tour of duty to everyday life. I’m proud that, once again, Illinois is leading the way and establishing a model that can be used by other states and the federal government to address a serious problem facing our returning veterans,” said Gov. Blagojevich.

“Many of our service members are facing multiple deployments and the number of Veterans suffering from TBI and battling PTSD is only growing as the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan continue,” said Tammy Duckworth, IDVA Director. “We need to meet the needs of our Veterans now and by offering confidential assistance through the Illinois Warrior Assistance Program we hope to make what can be a difficult transition from combat to daily life easier for our service members and their families.”

The Illinois Warrior Assistance Program provides confidential assistance for Illinois veterans as they transition back to their everyday lives after serving our country. Its goal is to help service members and their families deal with the emotional and psychological challenges they may be facing. The program has three major parts:

- First, it offers a 24-hour, toll-free helpline at 1-866-554-IWAP (4927), which is staffed by health professionals to assist veterans, day or night, with the symptoms associated with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).
- Second, it provides Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) screening to all interested Illinois veterans over the phone via the helpline or through the State of Illinois Department of Veterans’ Affairs (IDVA) Veteran Service Officers (VSOs).
- Third, it makes TBI screenings mandatory for all returning members of the Illinois Army National Guard and Air National Guard.

If a veteran has a positive screening for PTSD or TBI and is uninsured or underinsured, he or she could be eligible for additional diagnostic review and treatment for PTSD or TBI through the Program. The hotline and the network of providers will be operated through Magellan Health Services, Inc.

The Army Surgeon General’s Task Force on Traumatic Brain Injury released a report this month on January 17th, recognizing that there were major gaps in the system when it came to TBI identification, documentation, communication among levels of care, and screening procedures. According to the report, “TBIs have been called one of the signature wounds of the current conflicts” yet “it is unknown how many Soldiers have suffered a TBI during OEF/OIF.” It goes on to say that “the TBI screening of over 35,000 redeploying Soldiers has revealed a 10-20 percent rate of a mild TBI while deployed” and that “systemic, Army-wide screening for TBI upon redeployment is not currently practiced.”

The TBI screening tool was created by Dr. Elliot Roth, Senior Vice President, Medical Director, and Felise Zollman, Medical Director of the Brain Injury Program at the Rehabilitation Institute of Chicago.

“The brain is the human body’s most complex organ making brain injury one of the most complicated injuries to treat. Brain injuries can manifest in ways that are not readily apparent and the process of detecting and determining the extent of injury can be highly complex,” said Felise Zollman, M.D., Medical Director for the Rehabilitation Institute of Chicago’s Brain Injury Medicine and Rehabilitation Program. “RIC is proud to partner with the state of Illinois to lend its clinical expertise in the development and implementation of this screening tool which ensures Illinois veterans returning from combat unaware that they have a brain injury receive the care that they need as soon as possible.”

The Defense Department’s Task Force on Mental Health issued a report in June of last year declaring that the military “falls significantly short” in providing adequate psychological care to service members.

The report also stated that more than one third of our troops and veterans suffer from TBI and PTSD. Some common signs of PTSD and mild TBI include:

- Trouble sleeping
- Memory problems
- Trouble concentrating
- Feeling irritable and angry
- Having nightmares or frightening thoughts
- Feeling jumpy, anxious, or easily startled
- Feeling emotionally numb
- Feeling cut off from other people and other relationships

The Illinois Warrior Assistance Program is jointly coordinated by the Illinois Department of Veterans' Affairs, the Department of Healthcare and Family Services, the Governor's Office and the Illinois Department of Military Affairs.

Services covered by the Illinois Warrior Assistance Program include: referral to appropriate service provider; care coordination; counseling; psychotherapy; prescriptions for behavioral health pharmaceuticals; intensive outpatient services; and referral to an IDVA Veteran Service Officer (VSO) to help the veteran apply for all applicable state and federal benefits.

To be eligible for these services, a veteran must meet the following criteria:

- Be a resident of the State of Illinois;
- Be no more than 64 years of age; unless uninsured
- Have served for at least 180 days of duty after initial training;
- Is not an inmate of a public institution;
- Is not a resident of a nursing facility;
- Does not have healthcare coverage or does not have coverage for diagnostic review and treatment for PTSD or TBI included in their healthcare coverage and
- Is not eligible for USVA services or is eligible for USVA services but such services or coverage is inaccessible because the:
 - nearest site providing necessary services is more than 75 miles from the veteran's home;
 - veteran does not have transportation to a covered provider; or
 - veteran must wait more than three months for an appointment with a covered provider.

Illinois veterans who do not meet the eligibility requirements will be referred to an appropriate source of follow-up care.

If you are a veteran or service member suffering from symptoms associated with PTSD, or if you think someone you care about may be experiencing post-deployment stress or other combat-related emotional issues, call the Illinois Warrior Assistance Program confidential 24-hour toll-free helpline, 1-866-554-IWAP (4927) for more information and help. You can also visit www.illinoiswarrior.com for more information about the program.