

**STATEMENT OF
JACQUELINE GARRICK, CSW, ACSW, CTS
DEPUTY DIRECTOR, HEALTH CARE
NATIONAL VETERANS AFFAIRS AND REHABILITATION COMMISSION
THE AMERICAN LEGION
TO THE
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
ON THE
VA RESPONSE TO THE SEPTEMBER 11, 2001 ATTACKS**

OCTOBER 11, 2001

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for the invitation to contribute The American Legion's observations and recommendations to this extremely important hearing. On September 11, many American Legion members were sitting in the Committee's hearing rooms awaiting the National Commander's testimony before a Joint Session of the Veterans' Affairs Committees. As the horrendous acts began to unfold, Americans stood in disbelief. Fortunately, many Federal agencies are prepared to address such disasters with aggressive, coordinated activities.

As a clinical social worker and Certified Trauma Specialist (CTS), I volunteered to provide counseling support at the Pentagon Family Assistance Center in the Sheraton Hotel in Crystal City, VA. The American Legion graciously allowed me to spend many working hours assisting at the Center. I worked with both the Department of Defense's (DoD) Behavioral Mental Health Team and a nonprofit group, the Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors (TAPS). Together, these two programs provide much needed support services at the Center or in the Pentagon. The American Legion provided resource materials and made referrals for financial assistance and peer support. Additionally, The American Legion Auxiliary donated \$10,000 to provide children's grief workbooks and other self-help materials for the survivors and their family members.

The American Legion also re-instituted its Family Support Network to assist Reservists and members of the National Guard federalized to respond to this national emergency. During the Persian Gulf War, the Family Support Network provided much needed assistance to family members in local communities across the country. Services included such activities as childcare assistance, automobile maintenance, home repairs, and financial assistance provided by local members of The American Legion family. Over a half million dollars in grants were provided to the families of activated servicemembers during the Persian Gulf War. The American Legion renews this commitment to assist the citizen soldiers, sailors, airmen, Marines, and their families for the duration of this crisis.

Through this first-hand involvement, I witnessed the role of the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) in responding to this tragic event. The Veterans Benefits Administration, Veterans

Health Administration and the National Cemetery Administration were mobilized to assist in answering questions, providing mental health services, filing for benefits, and assisting with burial arrangements. VA also worked with Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), the Office of Crime Victims (OCV), American Airlines and the American Red Cross.

VA's National Center for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) sent six team members from the Palo Alto Education Division to the Pentagon Family Assistance Center within days of the attack. After consulting with previous DoD contacts and obtaining permission from VA, the Division Director decided to drive, virtually non-stop across country, to respond to the disaster. For more than two weeks, this team provided psychological support and education to the recovery workers and family members at two separate locations.

At the Pentagon Family Assistance Center, VA's team provided:

- Psycho-education for counselors in support of families of missing or deceased.
- Debriefing of support staff, counselors, and other agencies (including Red Cross, FEMA, and DoD).
- Psycho-education and debriefing to Casualty Assistance Officers (CAO), who are charged with providing case management to the families of the deceased.
- Educational materials regarding disaster response for victims and helpers.
- Facilitator's guide for behavioral and emotional support debriefing for use by DoD counselors.
- Consultation with operation and mental health leadership in a long-term disaster response plan.
- Family support.
- Program evaluation questionnaire for CAOs to assess preparedness, effectiveness, and utilization of resources while providing services for family members of deceased victims.

At the US Army Community and Family Support Center Command Group in Alexandria, Virginia, VA's team provided:

- Psycho-education regarding human response to disaster and utilization of psychological first aid.
- Psycho-educational materials.
- Counseling to Pentagon employees.
- A survey for staff to use as self-assessment in response to the disaster.

The reputation and consultation services of the National Center are recognized throughout the world. The National Center provides more than simply long-term care for combat veterans suffering from PTSD, but also includes Acute Stress Disorder and Disaster Mental Health. This group published a guidebook that serves as the model for Pentagon relief efforts. The National Center for PTSD's recent performance demonstrates the valuable role of VA in response to such disaster. The presence of the National Center for PTSD was greatly appreciated by representatives of DoD, FEMA, Red Cross, OCV, TAPS, and the other responding organizations.

Initially, DoD did not plan to include VA in the recovery efforts. The plan used in responding to this disaster was from the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) model, which does not include VA. **The American Legion strongly recommends that VA be added to NTSB's list.** Under the Aviation Disaster Family Assistance Act of 1996, the Chairman of the NTSB may request the assistance of:

- American Red Cross
- Department of State
- Department of Health and Human Services
- Department of Justice and the Federal Bureau of Investigation
- Federal Emergency Management Agency
- Department of Defense

The National Center for PTSD has an ongoing agreement with the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) to respond to disasters. In New York, the National Center coordinated efforts with Federal, state, and city officials. They continue to work with the New York Fire Department in planning the next phase of mental health services to be offered.

The National Center for PTSD provides resource materials on the immediate affects of trauma on survivors, families, rescue workers, and children through their website. As of last week, this website received approximately 50,000 hits daily. The National Center expects to continue to play a major role in providing consultation, education, and research information in this post-disaster response.

There seems to be a need for an internal VA response and coordination protocol in the event of a national emergency. **The American Legion recommends that the National Center for PTSD serve as the lead agent in coordinating such a protocol.** Since there are 206 Vet Centers around the country that can be activated to provide counseling in local communities, the Readjustment Counseling Services is another valuable resource in helping to provide disaster relief.

The VA/DoD Health Resources Sharing and Emergency Operations Act of 1982 gives VA the mission as primary backup for DoD and FEMA in the event of a disaster or armed conflict. The National Disaster Medical System Federal Coordinating Center Guide identifies plans and coordination protocols for local exercises and responsibilities that include VA. However, according to the key assumptions in the VA Strategic Plan 2001-2006, "The United States will not engage in any major global or regional conflict during the period of this plan." Yet, the same plan lists as an objective, "Improve nation's response in the event of a national emergency or natural disaster by providing timely and effective contingency medical support and other services."

The American Legion remains concerned over this assumption. Currently, VA lacks the resources to fully staff the additional inpatient beds, if needed. VA must carry out a Continuity of Operation plan that includes annual tests, training, and exercises; preparation of alternate operating facilities; and identification of designated emergency planners. The American Legion believes the number of VA and DoD sharing agreements will increase over the next few years.

The American Legion recommends that VA should prepare a report on its emergency preparedness plans to treat mass casualties resulting from a national emergency.

In conclusion, The American Legion is truly touched by the outpouring of national support for the victims and their families. As a nation, Americans have come together to use their sense of humanity to best counter terrorism. Federal and organizational bureaucracies, that often seemed territorial and to act in isolation, overcame those barriers to provide much needed comfort and services to victims and families.

The National Center for PTSD will be issuing a more detailed report on its involvement in the response to this tragic event. The results of this report should help establish the framework for future national emergency contingency plans. VA must certainly be listed as a Federal agency that responds with NTSB. There should be on going communication and liaison activities between VA, DoD and FEMA in accordance with VA's mission to act as a backup to these Federal agencies. The American Legion requests that a new assessment and re-evaluation of VA's strategic plan be completed to determine if it has not underestimated the potential need for bed space and emergency medical care.

Mr. Chairman, that concludes this statement.