

110<sup>TH</sup> CONGRESS  
2<sup>D</sup> SESSION

# H. R. 7214

To amend title 38, United States Code, to direct the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to use the Health Professionals Educational Assistance Program of the Department of Veterans Affairs to increase the number of licensed mental health professionals in the Department of Veterans Affairs available to assist veterans suffering from the effects of combat stress, and for other purposes.

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## IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

SEPTEMBER 28, 2008

Ms. WATERS introduced the following bill; which was referred to the  
Committee on Veterans' Affairs

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## A BILL

To amend title 38, United States Code, to direct the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to use the Health Professionals Educational Assistance Program of the Department of Veterans Affairs to increase the number of licensed mental health professionals in the Department of Veterans Affairs available to assist veterans suffering from the effects of combat stress, and for other purposes.

1        *Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representa-*  
2        *tives of the United States of America in Congress assembled,*

1 **SECTION 1. SHORT TITLE.**

2 This Act may be cited as the “Veterans Combat  
3 Stress Healthcare Improvement Act”.

4 **SEC. 2. FINDINGS.**

5 Congress makes the following findings:

6 (1) More than 1.6 million members of the  
7 Armed Forces have been deployed in Afghanistan or  
8 Iraq for Operation Enduring Freedom and Oper-  
9 ation Iraqi Freedom.

10 (2) The 2008 RAND Corporation report enti-  
11 tled “Invisible Wounds of War” stated that “With  
12 the possibility of more than 300,000 new cases of  
13 mental health conditions among OEF/OIF veterans,  
14 a commensurate increase in treatment capacity is  
15 needed.”.

16 (3) Combat stress refers to the expected and  
17 predictable emotional, intellectual, physical, or be-  
18 havioral reactions of members of the Armed Forces  
19 who have been exposed to stressful events in war or  
20 other military operations, and combat stress is often  
21 associated with post-traumatic stress disorder, anx-  
22 iety, depression, alcohol or drug abuse, and readjust-  
23 ment difficulties.

24 (4) Approximately 18.5 percent of the members  
25 of the Armed Forces who have served in Afghani-  
26 stan or Iraq are believed to be suffering from post-

1 traumatic stress disorder or depression, and the rate  
2 of suicide among veterans suffering from post-trau-  
3 matic stress disorder is a serious problem.

4 (5) Approximately 19.5 percent of the members  
5 of the Armed Forces who have served in Afghani-  
6 stan or Iraq report that they experienced a trau-  
7 matic brain injury during their deployment.

8 (6) It is estimated that only half of the veterans  
9 who need treatment for post-traumatic stress dis-  
10 order or traumatic brain injury actually seek treat-  
11 ment, and, of the veterans who receive treatment,  
12 only slightly more than half receive minimally ade-  
13 quate or better care.

14 (7) The Department of Veterans Affairs must  
15 be prepared to provide lifetime care for veterans who  
16 were severely wounded physically or psychologically  
17 in combat operations in Afghanistan and Iraq.

18 (8) The inadequate number of licensed mental  
19 health professionals trained to treat combat stress  
20 may have a negative long-term impact on the quality  
21 of mental health care for veterans.

22 (9) There are many challenges surrounding the  
23 hiring and retention of trained mental health pro-  
24 viders by the Department of Veterans Affairs.

1           (10) The Health Professionals Educational As-  
2           sistance Program under chapter 76 of title 38,  
3           United States Code, contains a number of scholar-  
4           ship, tuition reimbursement, and education debt re-  
5           duction programs that need to be better utilized by  
6           the Department of Veterans Affairs to relieve the  
7           shortage in the number of licensed mental health  
8           professionals employed by the Department who have  
9           received specialized training in the treatment of  
10          combat stress.

11 **SEC. 3. USE OF HEALTH PROFESSIONALS EDUCATIONAL**  
12                                   **ASSISTANCE PROGRAM TO INCREASE NUM-**  
13                                   **BER OF LICENSED MENTAL HEALTH PROFES-**  
14                                   **SIONALS EMPLOYED BY THE DEPARTMENT**  
15                                   **OF VETERANS AFFAIRS TRAINED TO TREAT**  
16                                   **COMBAT STRESS.**

17          (a) IN GENERAL.—Section 7603 of title 38, United  
18 States Code, is amended by adding at the end the fol-  
19 lowing new subsection:

20          “(e)(1) The purpose of this subsection is to establish  
21 a means to increase the number of licensed mental health  
22 professionals employed by the Department of Veterans Af-  
23 fairs who have the specialized training necessary to treat  
24 combat stress by providing a selection priority under the

1 following components of the Educational Assistance Pro-  
2 gram:

3           “(A) The scholarship program provided for in  
4 subchapter II of this chapter.

5           “(B) The tuition reimbursement program pro-  
6 vided for in subchapter III of this chapter.

7           “(C) The Selected Reserve member stipend pro-  
8 gram provided for under subchapter V of this chap-  
9 ter.

10           “(D) The employee incentive scholarship pro-  
11 gram provided for in subchapter VI of this chapter.

12           “(E) The education debt reduction program  
13 provided for in subchapter VII of this chapter.

14           “(2) In addition to the priority given under sub-  
15 section (d) in selecting applicants for acceptance in the  
16 Educational Assistance Program under subchapter II, III,  
17 V, or VI of this chapter, the Secretary shall give priority  
18 to the application of an individual who—

19           “(A) is otherwise eligible to receive assistance  
20 under the applicable subchapter; and

21           “(B) is accepted for enrollment, or is enrolled,  
22 as a student at a qualifying educational institution  
23 in a course of education or training that is approved  
24 by the Secretary and—

1           “(i) leads to a degree as a licensed mental  
2 health professional with specialized training in  
3 the treatment of combat stress; or

4           “(ii) in the case of an individual who is al-  
5 ready a licensed mental health professional,  
6 provides specialized training in the field of com-  
7 bat stress.

8           “(3) In addition to the priority given under sub-  
9 section (d) in selecting applicants for acceptance in the  
10 Educational Assistance Program under subchapter VII of  
11 this chapter, the Secretary shall give priority to the appli-  
12 cation of an individual who—

13           “(A) is otherwise eligible to receive assistance  
14 under such subchapter;

15           “(B) has completed a degree qualifying the in-  
16 dividual as a licensed mental health professional;

17           “(C) is an employee of the Department who  
18 serves in a position related to the treatment of com-  
19 bat stress; and

20           “(D) owes any amount of principal or interest  
21 under a loan used by that individual to pay costs di-  
22 rectly relating to earning the degree as a licensed  
23 mental health professional.

24           “(4) The Secretary shall make available to personnel  
25 of the Department and to educational institutions offering

1 courses in mental health such materials as the Secretary  
2 considers appropriate to provide information on the Edu-  
3 cational Assistance Program priorities available under this  
4 subsection and shall encourage educational institutions to  
5 disseminate the materials to students.

6 “(5) The priority required by paragraphs (2) and (3)  
7 shall apply until such time as the Secretary certifies to  
8 Congress that the shortage no longer exists in the number  
9 of licensed mental health professionals employed by the  
10 Department of Veterans Affairs who have specialized  
11 training in the treatment of combat stress.

12 “(6) Not later than 60 days after the date of the en-  
13 actment of the Veterans Combat Stress Healthcare Im-  
14 provement Act, the Secretary shall issue guidelines for the  
15 identification of educational programs that are qualified  
16 to provide specialized training in the treatment of combat  
17 stress.

18 “(7) In this subsection:

19 “(A) The term ‘licensed mental health profes-  
20 sional’ includes individuals certified as a social work-  
21 er, psychologist, psychiatrist, or in such other dis-  
22 ciplines as the Secretary determines to be appro-  
23 priate for purposes of this subsection.

24 “(B) The term ‘combat stress’ refers to the ex-  
25 pected and predictable emotional, intellectual, phys-

1 ical, or behavioral reactions of veterans who have  
2 been exposed to stressful events in war or other mili-  
3 tary operations, and combat stress is often associ-  
4 ated with post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety, de-  
5 pression, alcohol or drug abuse, and readjustment  
6 difficulties.

7 “(8) There is authorized to be appropriated to the  
8 Secretary \$15,000,000 for each of fiscal years 2009  
9 through 2011 to carry out this subsection.”.

10 (b) RULE OF CONSTRUCTION.—Nothing in the  
11 amendment made by subsection (a) is intended to limit  
12 or define the diagnosis or treatment of veterans’ medical  
13 conditions.

14 (c) REAUTHORIZATION OF EXPIRED SCHOLARSHIP  
15 PROGRAM.—Section 7618 of title 38, United States Code,  
16 is amended by striking “1998” and inserting “2011”.

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