



## VA mental health hiring is flawed, critic says

Thursday May 3, 2012

*By Patricia Kime - Staff Writer*

A representative of a major mental health organization blasted the Veterans Affairs Department for failing to hire therapists whom he says could ease VA staffing shortages and eliminate prolonged waiting periods for veterans in need of care.

David Kaplan, chief professional officer for the American Counseling Association, said Wednesday that VA has ignored licensed professional counselors, or LPCs, in its efforts to fill mental health vacancies in its medical system.

Requirements for LPC licensure vary from state to state, but in general, they are masters degree-level professionals with education and clinical experience in psychotherapy treatment and counseling.

"There's an unconscionable crisis going on now with mental health treatment for those who have served our country, and the really sorry thing about this is it doesn't have to be," Kaplan said.

VA has 1,500 vacancies for mental health staff. It announced in April it plans to hire an additional 1,600 professionals.

But with a nationwide shortage of trained mental health workers, the department will be hard-pressed to fill its staffing needs without recruiting LPCs, Kaplan said.

"Each day, as these vacancies and positions remain unfilled, men and women continue to struggle with thoughts of suicide and post-traumatic stress disorder," he said.

The critique comes on the heels of a scathing VA inspector general's report released last month showing that officials inflated success rates in providing timely mental health services for veterans.

According to the IG, VA reported in 2011 that 95 percent of new patients seeking mental health services received full evaluations for care within the department's required 14-day window, when the figure actually was closer to 50 percent.

Average wait time, the IG found, was 50 days.

Five days after VA's April 19 announcement that it planned to hire 1,600 nurses, psychiatrists, psychologists and social workers to bolster its mental health staff, officials said marriage and family therapists and LPCs, also known as licensed professional mental health counselors, are included in the hiring effort.

"The addition of these two mental health professions is an important part of VA's mission to expand access to mental health services," VA Secretary Eric Shinseki said in a release.

But Kaplan worries the announcement is simply paying lip service to Congress, which passed the Veterans Benefit Health Care and Information Technology Act in 2006 to require VA to draft qualification standards for LPCs and hire them.

Kaplan noted that in the past 14 weeks, VA has advertised jobs for nearly 400 licensed clinical social workers but just eight LPCs.

"VA doesn't get it," he said. "They are more focused on getting veterans in the system than they are on providing the service."