



Giffords: Open local mental aid to war vets

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Rep. Gabrielle Giffords, D-Ariz., says she wants to open community-based mental health and social services in southern Arizona to veterans of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Neal Cash, chief executive officer of Community Partnership for Southern Arizona, the regional behavioral health authority, said several months ago he's been talking with Giffords about having CPSA's network of dozens of mental health professionals help those veterans, especially those who feel stigmatized by seeking mental health care at Veterans Affairs.

Rep. Bob Filner, D-Calif., chairman of the House Veterans Affairs Committee, said in a teleconference with Giffords from Washington Tuesday that the Veterans Health Care Improvement Act of 2007 allows veterans to get mental health care outside the VA system.

He said VA can sign contracts with community mental health providers.

"The VA simply doesn't have the resources to do the job. They should welcome it, not push it away."

"The VA needs to open itself up," Filner said. "Why it hasn't happened yet really just about control" and power.

Rep. Michael H. Michaud, D-Maine, chairman of the House Veterans Affairs Health Committee, also spoke from Washington Tuesday. He said "the existing wars have put a terrible strain on the VA health care system" and that community providers can help.

Dr. David C. Emelity, head of mental health services at the Southern Arizona VA Health Care System, said in a recent interview with the Tucson Citizen he did not want to involve CPSA with the VA mental health care system.

"With (the VA's) computerized outpatient record system, all the providers know what's going on with a patient, what the others are doing, lab results and everything," he said.

"Care is better when you can really integrate it. If we fragment it with outside (community providers that) don't integrate with our system, it doesn't make the continuity quite as good."

He said the local VA is adding more mental health workers, "siphoning off mental health providers" from the community.

"The challenge is implementing. Getting people hired, getting everything in place and getting the word out to the veteran population that we have these programs," Emelity said.

"You have resources in your community and we want to be able to use them," Filner said.

"This job has to be done," he said. "We cannot lose these children."