Gov. Perry Announces Initiatives to Expand and Improve Mental Health Programs for Veterans

Monday, November 09, 2009

Thank you for being here this afternoon. As we observe Veteran’s Day this week, we honor the men and women of the Armed Forces and the tremendous sacrifices they make to preserve the freedoms all Americans enjoy.

As home to 18 U. S military installations, Texas has long respected and valued the contributions veterans and their families make to our state.

While Texas and the rest of the nation continue to struggle with the senseless shootings last Thursday at Fort Hood, seeking answers to the question “why,” we are reminded of the debt we owe to our veterans.

I suspect it will be a while before we know for certain what motivated a member of the U.S. military to turn a weapon on his fellow soldiers and even longer before the Fort Hood community returns to a sense of equilibrium in their daily lives.

However, the stress of those events adds yet another layer to the pressure that military families endure every day. As the frequency and duration of deployments increase and combat operations continue military members and their families walk a tougher road every day.

I am here today to mark the commencement of a number of initiatives designed to assist our military community that our legislature enacted in the 81st session and announce that we are working with the legislature to dedicate an additional $5 million to mental health treatments for veterans and their families.

The relationship between Texas and the U.S.
Military stretches back to our establishment of a state.

Throughout our history, Texas has played host to military installations and sent her sons and daughters to serve in the defense of our country.

In the course of that longstanding relationship, Texans have learned firsthand that the challenges of military service are genuine going far beyond just the rigors of boot camp and lingering well past an individual’s service in a combat zone. Whether they carry a visible wound or one that lies a little deeper, our veterans deserve our best effort to support them as they re-enter the communities they risked it all to defend.

We must make sure our veterans return from the field of battle to live a life of dignity with access to the services they were promised when they raised their right hands and pledged to defend our nation against all enemies, foreign and domestic.

Unfortunately, when it comes to issues of mental health, our service members have several challenges to overcome.

Some not only have to deal with the realities of post-traumatic stress disorder or traumatic brain injury they must also contend with an unfortunate stigma within the warrior culture that portrays asking for help as a sign of weakness.

Here in Texas, we are undertaking a number of key initiatives to help our returning service members handle that challenge.

First, as of today, we are expanding mental health treatment for veterans by making $5 million worth of state grant funding available to local mental health authorities.

I want to thank Lt. Governor Dewhurst, Speaker Straus and the Texas legislature for their collaboration in making this investment in our veterans and their families a reality.

These new funds will help expand existing programs and improve a number of initiatives approved during the 81st legislative session.

They include establishing at least one peer-to-peer support program in each of our state’s 39 Local Mental Health Authority regions.

This vet-to-vet approach reduces the impact of that warrior’s aversion to seeking help by connecting them with fellow vets who are not only willing to help, but trained to make a difference.

I want to thank SEN Jane Nelson and REP Frank Corte for their work passing Senate Bill 1325 which called for the vet-to-vet program.

I hope that, someday soon, VFW posts and American Legion halls across the state will have their own vet-to-vet teams displaying that esprit-de-corps that makes our armed forces so effective and the veteran’s community so close-knit.

Another priority is to recruit and train practitioners to provide additional mental health support for veterans.

That is why I am so excited about the “Give an Hour” program which will expand into key areas of our state over the next year with the help of the Texas Veterans Commission and our Department of State Health Services.

Since it was founded by Dr. Barbara Van Dahlen Give An Hour has donated nearly 17,000 hours of mental health services to active duty personnel, veterans and their families all across the country. We need more of that in Texas and are investing the resources to make that happen.
We will also be expanding programs to support veterans’ families, since they share the challenges of adjusting to civilian life.

These new family education and support programs will be modeled on nationally-known programs such as Operation Enduring Families and the SAFE Program.

Finally, we will continue improving ways to let veterans know about available resources by upgrading the TexVet website which serves as a portal to all federal, state and local benefits available to veterans.

This one-stop-shop will steer them toward the help they need to deal with the after-effects of their service and, ultimately, live rewarding, productive lives as fully-integrated members of the community. Texas is honored to support our defenders in this fashion.

Now, to continue our presentation, and to discuss the public health aspects, I would like to introduce Dr. David Lakey, Commissioner of the Texas Department of State Health Services. David?

Thank you, David.

Next, I would like to introduce Brigadier General Karen Rankin, Chair, Texas Veterans Commission. General?

Thank you, General, and thank you for your ongoing leadership of our efforts to properly honor our veterans.

Now, I would like to introduce one of our state’s strongest advocates for veterans, Senator Leticia Van de Putte. Senator?

Thank you, Senator. Now, to provide the perspective of a representative and a veteran, I’d like to introduce Representative Frank Corte. Frank?

Thank you, Frank, and thank all of you here for your ongoing support of our state’s military community, both active duty and veterans, and their families.

I also want to thank our hosts here at VFW Post 76 for your hospitality and for preserving this supportive community for our veterans.

Now we’d be happy to take questions on these initiatives from our friends in the working press here today.