

Testimony to the House Veterans, Military and Homeland Security Committee

January 17, 2012

Good afternoon Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee. I am Robbin Cole, Executive Director of Pawnee Mental Health Services. Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today regarding mental health and returning veterans.

Pawnee Mental Health Services (Pawnee) is a licensed community mental health center and licensed substance abuse treatment center serving ten counties in north central Kansas. (Riley, Geary, Pottawatomie, Marshall, Clay, Cloud, Mitchell, Republic, Washington, and Jewell Counties.) Ft. Riley, home of the Big Red 1, is located within Pawnee's service area.

As a member of the Association of Community Mental Health Centers of Kansas, Pawnee serves over 7,700 children and adults a year, providing a full continuum of outpatient mental health and substance abuse services.

The issue of mental health and returning veterans is of tremendous interest to me, not only because of my role as the Executive Director of Pawnee, but because I am the child of a veteran who was honorably discharged from the Army in 1954 after developing a serious mental illness while serving in the Korean War.

Nineteen years after he was discharged from service, my father experienced a second acute episode of serious mental illness which required that he be hospitalized at the VA here in Topeka. I witnessed firsthand what can happen when a veteran does not receive the mental health services he needs when he needs them. I also witnessed firsthand what can happen when a veteran finally does receive the mental health services he needs.

Since the return of the Big Red 1 to Ft. Riley, Pawnee has seen significant increases in the number of soldiers and their families who seek out services. Between FY07 and FY11, revenue for services provided to Tri-care beneficiaries almost doubled from \$561,374 to \$1,044,711 annually.

At this time Pawnee has approximately 1000 open cases where Tri-care is the primary insurer. Approximately 65% of these individuals receive services from our Junction City office and approximately 33% receive services from our Manhattan office. Approximately 60% are adults and 40% are children. Active duty soldiers are generally not referred off post for services though we do see many of them collaterally with their spouses or children.

Pawnee could and would like to do more to help our soldiers and their families. There are issues, however, which affect the ability of soldiers and their families to access services through Pawnee. First of all, Pawnee has been challenged to retain professional staff. Since 2007, Ft. Riley and/or their contractors have recruited away 14 of Pawnee's professional staff: seven therapists, five case managers and two registered nurses. The agency has also lost one therapist, one nurse practitioner and one registered nurse to the VA and one therapist to the Air Force.

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Of greater concern, and the main point of my remarks today, are the restrictive policies of Tri-care related to substance abuse treatment. Tri-care approves substance abuse treatment at only those facilities which are "free-standing" and provide the full continuum of substance abuse treatment.

So, even though Pawnee is an approved provider of mental health services for Tri-care, and even though Pawnee is licensed by the state of Kansas to provide substance abuse treatment services, Pawnee is not approved to provide substance abuse treatment services for Tri-care because Pawnee does not provide the full continuum of substance abuse treatment services. While there are several locations in Kansas where a Tri-care beneficiary can detox (Salina, Newton, Wichita, Emporia, Topeka, Shawnee Mission), the only Tri-care approved outpatient substance abuse treatment providers in the state are in Salina, Shawnee Mission and Newton. Furthermore, there are no Tri-care approved inpatient or residential substance abuse treatment providers in Kansas.

There is a loophole. If a Pawnee therapist will also diagnose a Tri-care beneficiary who needs substance abuse treatment with a mental illness, then Tri-care will authorize Pawnee to serve the individual under Pawnee's mental health contract with Tri-care. This loophole is highly problematic. It is no small matter to give someone a mental illness diagnosis if they don't have a mental illness, especially if it's done to ensure payment. Doing this is against Pawnee's policies and practices.

I'd like to close by telling you about a young woman for whom these policies made it nearly impossible to receive services. Lisa was the wife of a young soldier at Ft. Riley and the mother of four small children. Her health insurance was through Tri-care. Lisa's husband was deployed. Lisa had no family in the area, minimal social support or reliable transportation. When she learned that her husband was seeking a divorce, Lisa became suicidal and started drinking heavily.

Lisa came to Pawnee for help. It was clear that she needed treatment for her substance abuse disorder before she would benefit from any other mental health treatment. Even though Pawnee was not recognized as a substance abuse treatment provider for Tri-care, Pawnee staff spent hours on the phone trying to connect Lisa with services.

After hours of work, Pawnee secured approval for Lisa to be admitted to Bryan LGH Medical Center in Lincoln, Nebraska. Unfortunately, the clinical assessment which was done by Pawnee's licensed substance abuse treatment staff was not approved to authorize her admission. Lisa would need to be evaluated by an "approved" Tri-care facility.

Lisa was told she would need to drive from Junction City to Wichita for an alcohol and drug evaluation by an approved provider, only to have to turn around and drive to Lincoln, Nebraska for treatment in an approved facility. Tri-care should do better than this for our soldiers and their families.

Please urge Tri-care to recognize state licensed substance abuse treatment providers. Please urge Tri-care to eliminate the requirement that Tri-care beneficiaries who are seeking substance abuse treatment must also have a mental illness diagnosis in order for the services of Tri-care mental health providers to be reimbursed.

Thank you for the opportunity to present on this important matter. I stand for questions.