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Congress of the United States  
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July 23, 2013

The Honorable Chuck Hagel  
Secretary of Defense  
1400 Defense Pentagon  
Washington, DC 20301 - 1400

Mr. Secretary:

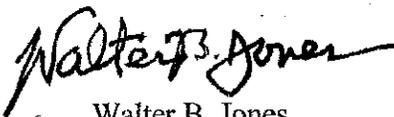
Let me begin by thanking you for your service during this time of economic difficulty for our nation. I am grateful for your work in support of our armed forces.

Many service members in my district receiving treatment for post-traumatic stress disorder or traumatic brain injuries are suffering because of the furloughs of Defense Department (DoD) civilian employees due to sequestration. These veterans and active-duty service members depend on civilian mental health care workers for treatment, which is increasingly delayed as more individuals seek treatment and the capacity to provide care decreases as employees are furloughed. For reference, I have enclosed two reports from the Jacksonville Daily News that chronicle this problem at Camp Lejeune.

While I appreciate DoD's efforts to mitigate the effects of furloughed mental health workers, we must do better. I am willing to do whatever I can to help you provide our service men and women with access to the high-quality mental health care they desperately need. After the sacrifices they have made for us, providing those resources is the least we can do for them.

Thank you again for your attention to this matter. I look forward to hearing from you soon.

Sincerely,



Walter B. Jones  
Member of Congress

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## Furloughs to impact mental health treatment

By THOMAS BRENNAN - Daily News Staff

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Updated at 12:14 p.m. to clarify third paragraph.

Government officials this week furloughed behavioral and mental health workers, striking a blow to a military already trying to clear a backlog of mental health claims.

More than 800 behavioral and mental health appointments will be unavailable to the Marines, sailors and their families of Camp Lejeune during the course of the 11-week government furlough program, which began on Monday, according to base behavioral and mental health staff.

The federal civil service portion of the Naval Hospital's mental health directorate aboard Camp Lejeune will provide 365 outpatient appointments per week. Before the furloughs, that number was 425 appointments per week. The furloughs mean a 14-percent daily decrease in available appointments with civil service providers, according to Naval Hospital officials. The realm of the directorate consists of active duty, civil service and contractors who together see more than 1,500 patients per week. No inpatient or emergency services will be affected by the furloughs.

"At the four mental health facilities on base, for example, there are 10 mental health professionals ranging from therapists to psychologists to psychiatrists that will be furloughed," said a member of Camp Lejeune's mental health staff, who is affected by the furloughs and wished to remain anonymous for fear of reprisals. "With the furloughs in place we're looking at approximately 60 less sessions per week and that's 60 possible appointments that will be added to the waiting list. That's 60 more people who can slip through the cracks."

The furloughing of government employees is a byproduct of government sequestration and affects more than 700,000 Department of Defense employees worldwide. Furloughs will cost affected employees 20 percent of their salary. Initially 22 furlough days were announced before being cut to 11.

Furlough guidance was given from high levels of the Department of Defense, said Navy Capt. David Lane, the commanding officer of the Naval Hospital aboard Camp Lejeune.

"It was planned from the very beginning that civilian employees would be furloughed," Lane said. "They specifically said civilians providing inpatient and emergency care were exempt ... Out of 481 civilian employees we were able to exempt 149."

The exemptions include staff in the emergency room, the intensive care unit, surgery department and more.

"We're not the same hospital with the furloughs," Lane said.

The hospital will continue normal operations, but will see challenges with federal civil service employees on furlough for 20 percent of each work week, Lane said.

Some Department of Defense employees are exempt from the furloughs, such as medical personnel required to handle emergency situations and crisis intervention. Behavioral and mental health providers were not among the exemptions.

"Currently if you look at the mental health directorate it probably takes a Marine or sailor two to four weeks to get their first follow-up after their initial assessment," the worker said. "Because the full effects of the furloughs are still unknown, we estimate that the effects will be an additional week at the very minimum."

Seeing a patient once per week is the goal but now, depending on patient caseload, that may turn into once every two weeks, said the worker.

Congressman Walter Jones says that cutting mental health programs is not in the best interest of the service member. Jones, R-N.C., said men and women in uniform deserve the highest standard of healthcare and furloughing mental health workers does not provide that.

"I believe that mental health professionals provide a crucial resource for our troops, and allowing furloughs to diminish the amount of care that these individuals are able to provide will only hinder the healing process for our service members," Jones said.

The director of mental health for Naval Hospital Camp Lejeune, Navy Capt. Sawsan Ghurani, said the quality of care will not diminish.

"The patients may not get the same time and attention of sessions they might normally be accustomed to," said Ghurani who verified that all personnel connected to mental health care will be affected by furloughs. "We will do everything within our power to keep all patients in our program and provide them with high quality care."

Even before furloughs took effect, the capacity to care for patients aboard Camp Lejeune was nearing its limit, Ghurani said. The furloughs will not limit Marines and sailors in crisis from receiving care though, said Ghurani.

"If anyone walks in our doors they are evaluated before they leave," said Ghurani who added that despite the shortage of 60 weekly appointments, service members who need care will get care. "That is a very stringent rule that we are not going to break under any circumstances: Everyone will get a screening if they come in and ask for help."

Ghurani said the furlough is an overall concern across the Department of Defense.

"It's difficult enough to ask for mental health care due to the stigma associated with it," she said. "What we don't want is people to think that because of the furlough we are unable to see people in crisis."

"We put the needs of our patients first."

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## Marines react to mental health furloughs

By *THOMAS BRENNAN - Daily News Staff*  
Published: Sunday, July 14, 2013 at 14:24 PM.

Recent furloughs of behavioral and mental health staff have left some local Marines questioning the quality and frequency of care they will receive on base.

"The days I go into therapy are an absolute blessing," said Cpl. Eric Smith, a Camp Lejeune Marine. "Now, with the furloughs in effect I'll need to wait longer for that same blessing to come. ...Congress and the Department of Defense need to take into consideration the aftermath created by war and do the right thing on our behalf."

"They need to ensure they are taking care of the men and women of the armed forces who are suffering from the mental ramifications brought on by war."

Due to sequestration, furloughs that affected a variety of civil service employees including behavioral and mental health providers began last week. The mental health directorate of Naval Hospital Camp Lejeune sees more than 1,500 patients between civil service employees, active duty service members and contract employees. Prior to the furloughs civil service employees accounted for 425 of those appointments. Now they will only be able to render 365.

"My provider is a civilian facing furlough," Smith said. "Before the furloughs she wanted to see me once every 10 days, but that couldn't happen because of her patient load. Now the furlough is just going to push my treatment days even further apart."

Smith, who suffered a Traumatic Brain Injury during one of his two deployments to Afghanistan, was diagnosed with post traumatic stress disorder and major depressive disorder in 2010.

Smith compared a cognitive therapy group he attends to Alcoholics Anonymous but for service members suffering from PTSD — and says it has been the most therapeutic treatment he has been afforded.

"I'm not nervous about what will happen to me with these furloughs — I'm over the hump in treatment," Smith said. "I'm worried about the one's just starting out. They're the one's we need to watch out for."

Clay Gentry, also a Camp Lejeune Marine, was wounded in Afghanistan in 2010 when he suffered both shrapnel wounds and a traumatic brain injury. Gentry was medically evacuated to the United States where he was immediately referred to physical therapy and mental health treatment by the Naval Hospital.

"The care has been very good," Gentry said. "It's very on par with what I need and I have absolutely no complaints. ...But our appointments are already spread out enough as it is. These furloughs are going to push them out even more and that's going to have very negative effects."

The memory problems associated with a TBI make life very difficult sometimes, making routines very important for patients like him, Gentry said.

"This is going to truly affect my days and my quality of life from day to day," Gentry said. "On a scale of one to 10 with 10 being the worst, this is going to be about a six or worse for patients."

Navy Capt. David Lane, the commanding officer of Naval Hospital Camp Lejeune, acknowledges that wait times may get worse for patients during the furloughs.

"We've done a lot to mitigate the current situation, but it's still a less than ideal situation," said Lane.

Clinical and administrative meetings have been modified and the mental health department is consolidating training, which in turn will offer more time to ensuring patient care remains a priority, said Lane.

For wounded Marines and sailors returning from Afghanistan early due to injuries, the Welcome Back Medical Evacuation Program will remain in place ensuring that a continuum of care is established immediately upon their return, serving as a safety net for wounded warriors in the remain behind elements, Lane said.

"It ensures they aren't lost in the mix of Marines and sailors coming and going from deployment," Lane said. "...We get them an immediate physical or mental evaluation even if it's in the middle of the night and then we establish appointments for them to go to."

The mental health providers are determined to make things work throughout the furloughs, said Sawsan Ghurani, the director of mental health for Naval Hospital Camp Lejeune. However, Ghurani said, wait times may increase: Patients used to being seen every five days may find themselves being seen every seven or 10 days.

Patients who are in the "stable phase" of their treatment may receive shorter appointment times, therefore allowing providers to direct care to those who need it most. In the interim there are different therapy options such as group, yoga, art, recreational or spirituality, Ghurani said.

"As time progresses, the impact of the furlough will become more clear and we will reassess what our team is doing," Ghurani said. "...We will never turn a Marine or sailor away if they need help. We will do everything we can to ensure our quality of care is not compromised."

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