

# Our military families deserve better access to quality health care. Here's why

## OPINION

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Today, Americans rightly honor our military veterans. We often celebrate the courageous men and women who risk their lives to protect our way of life with holidays, parades, and often votes for public office. In the month of March, we celebrate our veterans in their service to our country through National Medal of Honor Day, March 25, to foster recognition of Medal of Honor recipients and Vietnam Veterans Day, March 29, to commemorate those who fought in the Vietnam War. There are other dates throughout the year that we honor our military and their families.

However, when it comes to providing quality health care for them, our country falls very short. In fact, according to Rand research, only about half of all veterans who need mental health care ever receive it. Some commentators suggest this is the result of a perfect storm of provider shortcomings, access problems, and personal and social attitudes toward mental health issues.

Sadly, according to a recent survey by the Wounded Warrior Project, nearly 1 in 4 veterans who served in combat had suicidal thoughts in the past 12 months. At the same time, nearly all wounded veterans — as many as 98% — reported exposure to hazardous or toxic substances during military service, yet only 9% have received treatment at Veterans Affairs hospitals for their exposure.

Thankfully, Rand has found that the Department of Defense and VA have taken dramatic steps over the past decade to address barriers to care. For instance, the VA has hired more mental health providers and has established outreach programs to help veterans overcome logistical issues. The DoD has added many programs addressing psychological health, focusing on both clinical and nonclinical concerns. This is a step in the right direction.

Providing a full range of health care services for veterans must be more of a priority for all of us. That is why HeroCare Connect™ was established. The program is a unique collaboration of two unaffiliated health systems, Deborah Heart and Lung Center and Cooper University Health Care, with a shared commitment to one-call concierge service to improve access for veterans and military families to high quality specialty care in a timely and hassle-free manner.

HeroCare Connect serves both veterans and their family members along with active-duty personnel and their families who are referred for specialty care by their primary care physician. Through the program, Deborah and Cooper combine our

expertise in more than 75 specialties at our hospitals and outpatient locations throughout Southern New Jersey to support those who have served our nation.

Serving those who have sacrificed for our nation is what HeroCare Connect is all about. One phone call to a dedicated concierge phone service center — dial 866-943-7622 — is all that is needed for patients to be seen within 48 hours for non-routine specialty medical and diagnostic testing appointments, — have all reports sent to the right place, and perhaps most valuable, having all insurance forms and calls completed by our team. In the rare circumstance a patient needs a specific specialty or service that is not readily available, the HeroCare Connect team will work to get them the care they need with another provider.

In 2019, the VA launched the MISSION Act to empower veterans with greater access to health care services in the community and outside of the VA health system. Deborah and Cooper are both VA-approved Community Care Network providers and work collaboratively with the VA and area VA Community-Based Outpatient Clinics in our region. HeroCare Connect is a program that is in alignment with the MISSION Act and provides tangible benefits to military patients and their families at Joint Base McGuire-Dix-Lakehurst and across Southern New Jersey.

To date, nearly 11,000 veterans and their families have taken advantage of HeroCare Connect for their medical needs. HeroCare Connect is a program that can, and should, be duplicated throughout New Jersey and around the nation. Veterans and military families urgently need access to specialty care as well as the support of a grateful nation.

*Barbara George Johnson is chair of the Board of Trustees for Deborah Heart and Lung Center and George E. Norcross III, is chairman of the Board of Trustees for Cooper University Health Care.*



LEFT: Barbara George Johnson — Courtesy Kean University



RIGHT: George E. Norcross III, Chairman, Board of Trustees, Cooper University Health Care — Amy Newman/NorthJersey.com