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The Mental Health Association of New York City, the National Alliance on Mental Illness of New York City, and the Mental Health Association of Nassau County Call for Passage of Legislation Supporting the Mental Health Needs of NY Veterans

New York, NY – June 23, 2010 – The Mental Health Association of New York City, the National Alliance on Mental Illness, and the Mental Health Association of Nassau County today called for the passage of two bills before the New York State Legislature that would address the needs of service members, veterans, and family members with mental and/or substance use disorders in New York State.

Veterans returning to civilian life from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan suffer from tragically high rates of mental and substance use disorders. They are twice as likely as the general population to suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder, depression or substance abuse; have twice the risk of suicide; are more than twice as likely to be homeless, and 20% more likely to be unemployed.

Their families also suffer: the strain during deployment is tremendous, and the return of the veterans requires great adaptation. Marriages too often collapse, and children are at increased risk of experiencing emotional difficulties and struggling in school.

More than half of veterans and their families do not get help to deal with their emotional challenges.

In order to address these problems, leaders in the Legislature have introduced The Veterans Mental Health and Chemical Dependency Act (A11098/S7961). This bill would require the State to develop a plan to address a range of issues facing “veterans and their families who are experiencing mental health or substance abuse problems.” The plan would address the need for accessible housing, unemployment, the high risk of suicide, the special needs of female veterans, peer outreach and support programs, as well as essential treatment services.

They have also introduced a bill (A11054/S8062) that calls for State agencies to launch a public education campaign in order to combat stigma about mental illness and substance abuse among service members, veterans, and their families and to improve the availability of information and resources, especially through the use of the Internet and social networking sites.

“There are one million veterans in New York State and many millions more family members of veterans. They are all at elevated risk of mental health and substance abuse problems, brought on by combat service, separation from loved ones, and the stress of adaptation on return for deployment,” said Giselle Stolper, Executive Director of the Mental Health Association of New York City, which co-sponsors the Veterans’ Mental Health Coalition of New York City. “These two bills would provide crucial support for our veterans and should be passed quickly. Our veterans deserve it.”

“The stigma of mental illness can be as devastating as the persistent lack of life-saving treatment and services. Stigma often prevents veterans from seeking the treatment they need, and keeps families from obtaining vital support,” said Wendy Brennan, Executive Director of the National Alliance on Mental Illness of New York City. “We strongly support legislation to combat stigma among service members and their families, and to ensure that quality mental health services are available to them. These critical efforts will help keep families together and save lives.”

“The war in Afghanistan recently surpassed Vietnam as the longest war in U.S. history. We are truly at a tipping point in regards to the care of our veterans,” said John Jarvis, Director of Special Projects for the Mental Health Association of Nassau County and chair of the Veterans Health Alliance of Long Island. “They served our country. It is now time for the community to serve them.”

The Mental Health Association of New York City (MHA-NYC) is a nonprofit organization that addresses mental health needs in New York City and across the nation. It is a local organization with national impact and has a three-part mission of services, advocacy and education. MHA-NYC identifies unmet needs and develops culturally sensitive programs to improve the lives of individuals and families affected by mental illness while promoting the importance of mental health. www.mhaofnyc.org

The National Alliance on Mental Illness of New York City (NAMI-NYC Metro) is a grassroots organization that provides support, education, and advocacy for families and individuals of all ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds who live with mental illness. As one of the largest affiliates of the National Alliance on Mental Illness, we work collaboratively with our state and national affiliates, and with other stakeholders in the community to educate the public, advocate for legislation, reduce stigma, and improve the mental health system. For more information, visit www.naminycmetro.org.

The Mental Health Association of Nassau County (MHA of NC) is a not-for-profit membership organization dedicated to improving mental health through advocacy, education, program development and the delivery of direct services. www.mhanc.org

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