

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

May 16, 2006

Mr. David M. Walker
Comptroller General of the United States
General Accountability Office
441 G. Street, NW
Washington, DC 20548

Dear Mr. Walker,

I write to request that the General Accountability Office (GAO) conduct an investigation concerning the military's implementation of mental health screening prior to troop deployment. Recently, the *Hartford Courant* published a three-part series on alleged military mental health system deficiencies. The articles focused on the deployment and retention of troops in combat who exhibited signs of serious psychological distress. Through Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests and over 100 interviews, the *Courant* identified 11 service members who committed suicide in 2004 and 2005 after being kept in Iraq and Afghanistan despite repeated signs of psychological disorders.

The National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 1998 (PL 105-85, Sect. 765) required the military to conduct an "assessment of mental health" for all deploying troops. The assessment currently being used is a single mental health question on a pre-deployment form filled out by service members. According to the information obtained by the *Courant* through the FOIA requests, even troops who report a problem on that form are rarely referred to evaluations by mental health professionals. Department of Defense records indicate that only 6.5% of troops reporting a mental health problem were referred for evaluations before deployment.

As a member of the Senate Armed Services committee, I request that GAO conduct an investigation that evaluates the military's current pre-deployment mental health screening process. I am particularly concerned that only a small percentage of pre-deployed service members who report a mental health problem are actually referred to an appropriate counselor or doctor.

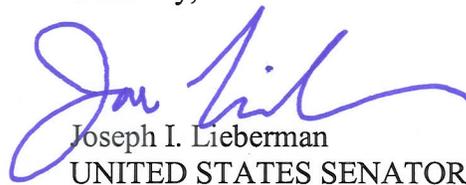
I am aware of the extreme pressures our servicemen and women are under in Iraq and Afghanistan and that many exhibit signs of distress and discomfort on a daily basis. I also know that the military healthcare providers, supervisors, and peers are important

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sources of information in determining when an individual needs additional support and psychological intervention. However, the articles in the *Courant* detailed numerous examples of soldiers who had long histories of serious mental illness who were deployed into combat situations.

The case study approach used in the *Courant* series makes it difficult to determine if deficiencies in the military's mental health system are anecdotal or widespread. Given your recently released report describing inadequate screening and treatment of post-traumatic stress disorder (GAO-06-397), I believe that GAO should continue its investigation to evaluate the operations and performance of pre-deployment mental health screening processes in the military. This analysis will provide members of the Senate Armed Services committee with necessary information to conduct appropriate oversight functions. Thank you for your attention to this matter, and I will look forward to your timely response.

Sincerely,



Joseph I. Lieberman
UNITED STATES SENATOR