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The war in Iraq is coming to a close. The men and women who fought so bravely will be home for the holidays, and we must plan for their return. These returning heroes must not only be honored, but granted the services they need to face the challenges they will encounter.

I have heard poignant stories of veterans who have traumatic brain injuries and experience post-traumatic stress, and of how difficult these cases are to bear. As we have seen the face of war change, so too have we seen new tests confront returning Iraq and Afghanistan veterans.

These men and women need services to detect and treat traumatic brain injuries and post traumatic stress. In the five years I've been in Congress, funding and performance of the Veterans Administration has increased. We've signed into law programs to help veterans transition to good careers. We have taken some positive steps, but we can - and should - do more.

From the moment our returning troops set foot on American soil, they should be treated with dignity and respect and care. Early detection and treatment are critical for men and women who are and will be struggling with post-traumatic stress. To let veterans slip through the cracks, their ailments undiagnosed, disrespects the sacrifices they have made.

However, the Veterans Administration is behind in implementing programs authorized in 2010. The VA was supposed to develop a program on mental-health care for Iraq and Afghanistan veterans and their families. The law also allows the VA to train and contract with community medical providers so they can work with these veterans. The VA needs to get these services in place now; the troops returning over the coming weeks will depend on these services in order to safely and successfully reintegrate into their communities.

Unfortunately, many will be returning to civilian life in a time of high unemployment among veterans. In 2010, well over 200,000 combat veterans were struggling to find gainful employment.

Our service members left behind careers, family and community to protect our way of life. We owe it to them to help them find good-paying jobs upon their return. Yet our veterans are experiencing higher levels of unemployment than their civilian counterparts.

Far too often, veterans have found that civilian employers don't understand the value of their military experience. We should offer incentives to businesses to employ veterans and find ways to translate military skills to their new jobs.

We must prepare to receive the 40,000 service members coming home from Iraq by the end of year. Taking strides to help our veterans will benefit not only them and their families, but will strengthen our economy and our nation, just as the GI Bill did after World War II.

The men and women who served so bravely and honorably must be given the tools they need to succeed in civilian life. As we have depended on them, now they must be able to depend on us. They deserve no less.

This article has been corrected since it appeared in print editions.

Rep. Jerry McNerney is the ranking member of the Disabilities Assistance and Memorial Affairs Subcommittee of the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs.

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