

The Modesto Bee

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Ryan Lundeby returned home in 2010 not able to communicate with his wife, an effect of post traumatic stress after serving four years in the Army as an Airborne Ranger, including three deployments in Iraq and two in Afghanistan.

For example, he said, one small argument over a blender in the kitchen sink escalated to smashing picture frames in anger.

"Little fights turned into big fights," Lundeby testified Thursday during a special hearing in Modesto of the subcommittee of the U.S. House Committee on Veterans Affairs. "With counseling, now I can communicate with the small problems."

He and his wife received marital counseling at a local Vet Center, which provides military veterans timely service for a variety of issues that arise as U.S. troops readjust to life outside of combat.

Lundeby was part of a panel of veterans who testified before the subcommittee at the American Legion Hall in Modesto's airport neighborhood. Reps. Jeff Denham, R-Turlock, and Jerry McNerney, D-Pleasanton, listened and questioned the veterans about their experiences returning home.

Denham said he was reminded of the importance of providing adequate care and services to military veterans after an October trip to Afghanistan as part of a congressional delegation.

"In the next two years, several hundred thousand of our service members will return home from

overseas, and what I saw on that trip makes it clear that now more than ever we must be vigilant about safeguarding the health and mental well-being of our service members and veterans," Denham said.

The hearing's purpose was to hear from military veterans on the value of services they receive and where improvements might be made, especially for those returning from Iraq and Afghanistan. Several dozen people attended the hearing.

"Of the veterans from recent conflicts who have accessed VA health care, more than 50 percent have displayed mental health issues, including post traumatic stress, substance abuse and mood disorders," McNerney said. "Veterans' mental health conditions not only affect them, but also have a significant impact on their families."

He said the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs has made some progress addressing mental health needs, but more needs to be done.

Need for veteran medical services has increased so much in Modesto that a new and expanded clinic is being built for the VA at 1115 Oakdale Road. The 24,233-square-foot facility will be more than twice the size of the VA's current clinic on McHenry Avenue.

It is expected to serve about 7,000 Stanislaus County veterans when it opens late next year. It will offer primary medical, mental health services, limited specialty care, and ancillary and diagnostic services.

Thursday's veterans panel, however, shared experiences of dealing with bureaucratic red tape that comes with VA services. They told the congressmen they instead found help from Vet Centers, where veterans interact closely with other veterans and service providers.

Lundeby said he discovered the Modesto Vet Center from Randall Reyes, a veteran outreach program specialist and 13-year veteran of the Marine Corps. The panelists told the congressmen that there needs to be more public awareness about the Vet Centers.

Before Reyes ran into Lundeby and told him about the Vet Centers, he said "I had no idea what my benefits were." Denham said the Vet Centers program was established in 1979 to help Vietnam War veterans who were faced with a VA that was unprepared to respond to their needs. McNerney said the Vet Centers are more "personal," not a "giant institution" like the VA.

Phillip White returned from Iraq in 2003 after serving in the Marine Corps. Honorably discharged, he told the congressmen he was given 90 days to get out of the military; not enough to readjust to life at home. "It's so hard to explain to you how hard it is to come back," White testified. "And there is nothing there for us. There's just so much pain and loss."

White spoke about the current failing economy, which has made it tougher for veterans to find work in the United States and created a strain on families. But he said he has worked through the tough times with help from the local Vet Center.

"Vet Centers do a great job on raising awareness, how to manage this strain within the home," White said. "There is only so much that can be done with counseling."