AN ACT to create a course of instruction to train mental health providers in veteran specific mental health issues

THE PEOPLE OF THE STATE OF NEW YORK, REPRESENTED IN SENATE AND ASSEMBLY, DO ENACT AS FOLLOWS:

1. Section 1. Short title. This act shall be known and may be cited as the "Veterans Mental Health Training Initiative".

2. Legislative intent. The legislature finds and declares that the state of New York and the country at large are facing a formidable challenge in serving the mental health needs of veterans returning from active duty in Iraq and Afghanistan. Since the beginning of Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom, over one and a half million active duty and reserve members of the United States military have been deployed to Iraq or Afghanistan, and nearly one-half million have been redeployed. With each deployment, our service members encounter extreme strains on their physical and mental health, which, in many cases have resulted in unprecedented rates of health and mental health problems, most notably post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and traumatic brain injury (TBI). Equally alarming, are numerous reports of increased suicide, addiction and homelessness among our returning veterans.

EXPLANATION--Matter in ITALICS (underscored) is new; matter in brackets [ ] is old law to be omitted.

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soldiers. Further, family members are struggling with the ramifications of extended and/or multiple deployments, resulting in serious emotional and psychological tolls.

In addition to high rates of PTSD, providers in the mental health community have also begun reporting increased cases of traumatic brain injury sustained in the Iraq and Afghanistan theatres of combat due in large part to the use of improvised explosive devices (IED). Equally disturbing is the rate at which TBI has been misdiagnosed as PTSD. Numerous reports have told the story of soldiers returning from Iraq and Afghanistan with brain trauma, but because there are no visible head wounds, symptoms such as memory loss and confusion are often mistaken as indicators of PTSD.

Many returning service members, particularly National Guard and Reserves, are not accessing services from the federal veterans administration or through the department of defense tricare system upon returning home; but rather, through community-based organizations and agencies. Therefore, community-based providers are experiencing an influx of returning service members for whom they are not entirely prepared to provide treatment.

To assure that such care be provided by an adequately trained mental health workforce, the state shall, through an open grant process, engage associations of social workers to train mental health providers in the identification, diagnosis, and course of treatment for combat related PTSD, TBI and other mental health issues, including substance abuse. This course shall also serve to educate service members and family members of service members in accessing mental health and psychosocial services.

S 3. The division of veterans' affairs shall:
   a. through an open and competitive process award a grant of no less than $500,000.00 for the purpose of training social workers, of all classifications, in a course of study related to the diagnosis and treatment of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), traumatic brain injury (TBI) and combat related mental health issues, including substance abuse. This grant shall be distributed in the amount of $250,000.00 at the beginning of each state fiscal year, for two years, starting in 2009; however, a sum to be determined by the division of veterans' affairs may be forwarded for future years' expenditures if it is determined to be necessary for the proper implementation of the program; and
   b. have the power to audit such association to ensure the proper expenditure of state funds.

S 4. The association receiving such grant pursuant to section three of this act shall:
   a. conduct a course of study consistent with national and state guidelines regarding the diagnosis and treatment of PTSD, TBI and combat related mental health issues to include substance abuse;
   b. conduct this course of study in multiple locations across the state;
   c. produce a yearly report to the legislature, the division of veterans' affairs, office of mental health and the office of alcoholism and substance abuse services regarding the progress, expenditures and effectiveness of the program;
   d. conduct this course of study in direct consultation with the division of veterans' affairs; and
   e. provide a certified continuing education course on veteran specific mental health issues, to be made available online.
S 5. The office of mental health and the office of alcoholism and substance abuse services shall:
   a. consult with the division of veterans' affairs and provide guidelines necessary for the proper implementation of this program; and
   b. have the power to make recommendations to the legislature as to the effectiveness and future need for such a program.

S 6. The department of education shall require, as part of continuing education for social workers, a course of study related to the diagnosis and treatment of PTSD, TBI and combat related mental health issues, including substance abuse.

S 7. This act shall take effect on the sixtieth day after it shall have become a law; provided, however, that effective immediately, the addition, amendment and/or repeal of any rule or regulation necessary for the implementation of this act on its effective date is authorized and directed to be made and completed on or before such effective date.