

WASHINGTON – U.S. Rep. Harry E. Mitchell today praised the Secretary of Veterans' Affairs for reversing the Department's earlier policy prohibiting the use television media to reach out to service men and women who suffer from mental health disorders when returning from war.

Mitchell, who serves as Chairman of the House Veterans' Affairs Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations, repeatedly called upon the VA to increase outreach to veterans who need mental health service and are at risk for suicide.

"This is about saving lives," said Mitchell. "We have a responsibility to do anything and everything we can and keep that promise to give our veterans the care they've earned."

Secretary of Veterans' Affairs James Peake personally notified Mitchell of the decision by phone today.

The Secretary's decision follows months of questions by Mitchell about the VA's efforts to reach veterans who may be at risk for suicide and have not already sought assistance from the VA. Out of an estimated veteran population of 25 million, the VA has approximately 7 million in their system. Only 3 million are reported to use the services on a regular basis.

In May, Peake publicly apologized to Mitchell for the VA's failure to produce documents requested by Mitchell relating to the VA's efforts to conduct outreach to veterans at risk for suicide. After April, after months of failing to respond to Mitchell's document request, the VA told Mitchell to "go file a freedom of information act request." [Source, CNN] [Source, Associated Press]

In response to a threat by Mitchell to pursue a subpoena, the VA began producing documents on May 9, 2008.

On June 4, 2008, Mitchell and Rep. Ginny Brown-Waite (R-Fla) asked the Committee to examine the VA's prohibition on TV advertising as a means to conduct outreach to veterans at risk for suicide. Brown-Waite is Ranking Republican Member of the House Subcommittee Mitchell chairs.

Citing conflicting statements by VA officials about whether the VA had the authority make use of TV advertising, Mitchell and Brown-Waite asked, in a letter to Chairman Bob Filner and Ranking Member Steve Buyer, "that the full Committee use its resources to explore the potential efficacy of a broadcast public awareness campaign as a means of conducting outreach to veterans at risk for suicide."