

Gates Promises Continued Commitment to Wounded

Donna Miles, American Forces Press Service

Gates Promises Continued Commitment to Wounded Warrior Care



U.S. Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates speaks during the Wounded Warrior Summit at the Pentagon, Oct. 20, 2008. DoD photo by U.S. Air Force Tech. Sgt. Jerry Morrison.

WASHINGTON, Oct. 20, 2008 – Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates assured participants in the first Wounded Warriors Family Summit

here today he will "continue to press forward with a sense of urgency" to provide top-level care and support for wounded warriors in a way that lays groundwork for the next administration's leaders to build on.

"I take the issue of wounded warriors personally," Gates told the audience of wounded warriors, families of wounded and fallen troops, and representatives of family support programs and veteran service organizations.

"I will repeat here the pledge I made to myself, to Congress and to countless moms and dads, husbands and wives," Gates told the group. "Other than winning the wars we are in, my highest priority is providing the best possible care for those who are wounded in combat."

As it presses forward, Gates said, his team will "do everything we can to set up the next leadership team for success" to ensure the work continues without interruption. "As long as there are wounded warriors in our care, we must – and we will – continue to fulfill our obligation to them," he said.

Gates praised the "grit and resilience" of wounded warriors and acknowledged the families of the severely wounded and fallen who "have sacrificed and suffered for our country in the most challenging ways."

He also extended thanks to volunteer groups and individuals who have worked on behalf of the troops and their families.

Gates cited broad strides in treating wounded warriors, including warrior transition units created to

help wounded servicemembers navigate the system as they get treatment and return to their units or transition to veteran status. During the last 19 months, the Army has dedicated more than 3,200 permanent cadre and staff to this effort to help nearly 8,500 soldiers.

In addition, Gates described efforts to merge the Defense Department's and Department of Veterans Affairs' disability evaluation systems so one process will result in one legally binding determination. He noted that a pilot program is under way, and that early indications show the effort will cut by half the time required for veterans to receive full VA compensation.

"We're making progress in improving the disability evaluation system, but we still have a long way to go to make to as easy as it should be," he told the audience.

Gates also cited progress in providing care for traumatic brain injury, combat stress and other mental-health issues, and in eliminating the stigma attached with seeking this care.

He pointed to improved evaluation and screening for anyone affected by blast or blunt trauma in the combat zone to help identify TBI, and the new Defense and Veterans Brain Injury Center that centralizes responsibility for consolidating information as it promotes TBI research.

"We've invested \$900 million in this effort, which includes \$300 million in research," he said. "And while we've learned a lot about how to better care for those with TBI over the past few years, we are poised to learn a great deal more."

Gates also noted elimination of "Question 21" on the federal security clearance form. The question about seeking mental-health care was considered an obstacle by some who thought it might jeopardize their careers.

"Although we have made significant progress in the last year and a half, there is no doubt that we still have a lot of work to do," Gates told the audience.

He cited the frustrating and often confusing paperwork process, incomplete and sometimes contradictory information provided about pay, benefits and compensation, and gaps in information sharing between DoD and the VA.

In lieu of the question-and-answer session scheduled to follow his address, Gates told attendees he wanted to be on the receiving end to hear from them. Participants took turns at the microphone, describing their personal situations and problems they face and recommending fixes. "I take these comments seriously, and we will do everything we can," he told the speakers.

Gates praised the summit organizers for providing a forum where wounded troops and family members could voice their concerns while sharing their experiences and roads to recovery. These conferences are "vital to keeping focus and attention on heroes" and ensuring that the United States stays true to the debt it owes them and their families, he said.

Gates noted that today's Wounded Warriors Family Summit served as a prelude to next month's Warrior Care Month observance.

"It will provide an opportunity to highlight the sacrifices of wounded troops and their families, take stock of how much has been achieved in this area, and reflect on how much more needs to be done," he

said.

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