



Security clearance question on mental health changed

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5/1/2008 - **WASHINGTON (AFPN)** -- Defense Department officials will change a question on the department's long-standing security clearance form referencing an applicant's mental health history because they believe it is needlessly preventing some people from seeking counseling.

The Standard Form 86, *Questionnaire for National Security Positions*, asks the applicant to acknowledge mental health care in the past seven years. It does not ask for treatment details if the care involved only marital, family, or grief counseling, not related to violence by the applicant, unless the treatment was court-ordered.

Officials said surveys have shown that troops feel if they answer "yes" to the question, they could jeopardize their security clearances, required for many occupations in the military.

As of April 18, applicants no longer have to acknowledge care under the same conditions, nor if the care was related to service in a military combat zone. The revised wording has been distributed to the services and will be attached to the cover of the questionnaire. The revised question will not show up printed on the forms until the department depletes its pre-printed stock later this year, officials said.

DOD security officials said no one has been denied a security clearance based solely on the fact they received mental health counseling, but the perception that receiving care would jeopardize a security clearance, combined with the stigma of having to acknowledge the care on the form, may have been preventing some from receiving needed care.

"Our people see it as a major blemish on their record. It is one of the highest reasons given on these surveys for why people don't seek mental health care," said David S. C. Chu, undersecretary of defense for personnel and readiness. "We want to be sure that our people are in good shape both mentally and physically."

About 1 million security forms are submitted annually within the Defense Department. Of those, less than 1 percent receives unfavorable determinations based solely on mental health issues, Rebecca Allen, deputy director of DOD security, said. Of those denied, factors besides simply receiving counseling were considered, she said.

"The perception was unfounded. There was no reason to be concerned about seeking mental health counseling from a security clearance standpoint," she said. "Answering yes has never been a sole reason ... for denying a security clearance. It would be the resulting information that would develop during the adjudication phase that may ... result in an unfavorable determination."

But an Army Inspector General's report last year said soldiers were hesitant to get counseling because of the fear of losing their security clearances. A recent Rand Corporation survey also supported those claims, officials said.

When determining a person's ability to manage classified information, though, officials consider the "whole person." There has never been from the security aspect a stigma associated with seeking mental health counseling, Ms. Allen said.

"We view that as a very positive measure," she said. "There is nothing wrong with seeking assistance for a mental issue, just as there is nothing wrong with seeking assistance for a physical issue."

"There is every reason to seek treatment when you need it, ... and it will not be a bar to your successfully receiving a security clearance," Ms. Allen said.

Dr. S. Ward Casscells, assistant secretary of defense for health affairs, said the stigma of receiving mental health care comes in many forms within the military.

"One is that people are afraid they are going to lose friends. They're afraid they're going to lose their chance at

promotion. [Or that] if you show weakness will you be a good leader? Will people follow? Or will you be seen as someone who is out to just get a desk job?" he said.

But, Doctor Casscells said, mental health counseling is for all ranks, and has not stopped the progression of many senior military officials.

"We've got guys here with one, two, three stars on their shoulders who have had counseling. And they feel they've benefited by it," Doctor Casscells said. "It's your duty to do that. It's your opportunity to grow as a person. It's your opportunity to prove yourself as a leader."

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