



PERSONNEL AND
READINESS

UNDER SECRETARY OF DEFENSE
4000 DEFENSE PENTAGON
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20301-4000

DEC - 7 2023

The Honorable Mike D. Rogers
Chairman
Committee on Armed Services
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

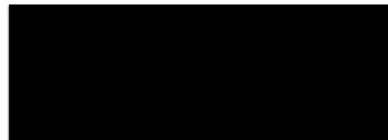
Dear Mr. Chairman:

The Department's response to House Report 117-397, page 210, accompanying H.R. 7900, the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2023, "Warfighter Brain Health," is enclosed.

The report provides a summary which indicates at this time, research does not support the use of cognitive or non-cognitive assessments to evaluate warfighter capabilities and mission readiness by field psychologists, with additional research required. While the state of the science is not mature enough for implementation, the Department of Defense has multiple policies to address cognitive and non-cognitive assessments in the operational environment and is working on additional training and evaluation capabilities.

Thank you for your continued strong support for the health and well-being of our Service members.

Sincerely,



Ashish S. Vazirani
Acting

Enclosure:
As stated

cc:
The Honorable Adam Smith
Ranking Member

Report to the Committee on Armed Services of the House of Representatives



Warfighter Brain Health

December 2023

The estimated cost of report or study for the Department of Defense (DoD) is approximately \$3,100 for the 2023 Fiscal Year. This includes \$0 in expenses and \$3,100 in DoD labor.
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report is in response to House Report 117–397, page 210, accompanying H.R. 7900, the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2023, on Warfighter Brain Health. The report specifically requests the Secretary of Defense and the Director, Defense Health Agency to report on how the Department plans to further advance cognitive and non-cognitive assessments which can provide rapid evaluation of warfighter capabilities to complete their mission, and to train field psychologists to administer and evaluate such advanced cognitive and non-cognitive assessments.

The Department recognizes the potential importance of implementing cognitive and non-cognitive assessments to evaluate warfighter capabilities and mission readiness. Furthermore, the Department agrees that threats to mission readiness arise from multiple sources and that a “whole person” approach to the identification and mediation of such threats is desirable where feasibly applied.

At this time, research does not support the use of cognitive or non-cognitive assessments to evaluate warfighter capabilities and mission readiness by field psychologists. Currently, there is a knowledge gap that must be bridged prior to implementing such a program. Necessary research includes: 1) understanding cognitive and non-cognitive requirements needed to perform specific occupational fields; 2) developing and testing assessments; 3) identifying interventions to enhance cognitive performance; and 4) determining the feasibility of training field psychologists to conduct assessments.

While the state of the science is not mature enough for implementation, the Department of Defense (DoD) has multiple policies to address cognitive and non-cognitive assessments in the operational environment and is working on additional training and evaluation capabilities.

BACKGROUND

The DoD’s ability to effectively protect the country is contingent on warfighters’ sound decision-making on the battlefield. As part of this mission, the Deputy Secretary of Defense provided direction for a Comprehensive Strategy and Action Plan for Warfighter Brain Health (signed June 8, 2022),¹ which synchronized and prioritized efforts into a single brain health approach to produce more efficient and effective results. Warfighter brain health includes psychological, physical, and cognitive status that affects a warfighter’s capacity to function adaptively in any environment, impacting mission readiness and operational capacity.²

¹ Department of Defense (2021). Department of Defense Warfighter Brain Health Initiative: Strategy and Action Plan. <https://media.defense.gov/2022/Aug/24/2003063181/-1/-1/0/DOD-WARFIGHTER-BRAIN-HEALTH-INITIATIVE-STRATEGY-AND-ACTION-PLAN.PDF>.

² Deputy Secretary of Defense Memorandum, “Comprehensive Strategy and Action Plan for Warfighter Brain Health,” October 1, 2018 and National Defense Strategy, January 2018.

Mental health is a vital component of wellness and overall functioning. It is associated with stress regulation, cognitive decisions, sleep quality and quantity, and other areas of function. The heterogeneity of cognitive and non-cognitive functions and potential impairments necessitates specialized training and consideration of tools and technologies sensitive enough to detect potential impairments, especially outside of traditional clinics.³ Therefore, it is integral to understand the current state of the research and readiness for translation prior to implementing cognitive and non-cognitive assessments to evaluate warfighter capabilities and mission readiness in the field.

EVALUATING A PLAN FOR USE OF FIELD PSYCHOLOGISTS

The use of cognitive and non-cognitive assessments that can provide rapid evaluation of warfighter capabilities requires an understanding of the current state of research and its readiness for translation. The state of the science needs to be advanced enough for cognitive and non-cognitive assessment's ability to identify a root cause of a problem to render a Service member maladaptive for their career choice, to then justify these solutions' assessment, training, and implementation.

Capability gaps also exist between operations and research that must be overcome prior to the development, testing, and fielding of an assessment program. A holistic cognitive and non-cognitive assessment program delivered in deployed and non-deployed settings that would address preclinical, clinical, and situational determinants of readiness requires additional research to achieve the following objectives and to address capability gaps:

- 1) Understand the cognitive and non-cognitive requirements that are critical to performance in specific occupational fields;
- 2) Develop and test instrumentation sensitive and specific to the identified requirements;
- 3) Identify interventions that effectively promote resiliency and remediate warfighter cognitive capability/performance gaps; and
- 4) Determine the feasibility and applicability of training and use of "field psychologists" to conduct assessments in deployed and non-deployed settings.

CURRENT DEPARTMENTAL INITIATIVES

Currently there are several key Department of Defense Instructions (DoDIs) that direct care within the operational environment and address cognitive, and non-cognitive, assessments at various time points. These DoDIs include but are not limited to: DoDI 6490.03, "Deployment Health;"⁴ DoDI 6490.05, "Maintenance of Psychological Health in Military Operations;"⁵ DoDI 6490.11, "DoD Policy Guidance for Management of Mild Traumatic Brain Injury/Concussion in the Deployed Setting;"⁶ and DoDI 6490.13 "Comprehensive Policy on Traumatic Brain Injury-Related Neurocognitive Assessments by the Military Services."⁷

³ Hays, R., Henson, P., Wisniewski, H., Hendel, V., Vaidyam, A., & Torous, J. (2019). Assessing cognition outside of the clinic. *Psychiatr Clin North Am.* 42(4), 611-625. doi: 10.1016/j.psc.2019.08.003.

⁴ <https://www.esd.whs.mil/Portals/54/Documents/DD/issuances/dodi/649003p.pdf>.

⁵ <https://www.esd.whs.mil/Portals/54/Documents/DD/issuances/dodi/649005p.pdf>.

⁶ <https://www.esd.whs.mil/Portals/54/Documents/DD/issuances/dodi/649011p.pdf>.

⁷ <https://www.esd.whs.mil/Portals/54/Documents/DD/issuances/dodi/649013p.pdf>.

In addition to current DoDIs, the Department is working to build additional training and evaluation capabilities outlined in the Joint Requirements Oversight Council Memorandum (JROCM), which validate the requirements found in the Initial Capabilities Document. This JROCM identifies 10 actions that specifically address training and education of providers and non-providers alike.

The DoD will continue making strategic investments to develop capabilities and knowledge to establish an effective holistic warfighter brain health assessment program for the capability gaps and requirements identified through JROCM. As such, the DoD is also working to ensure research collaboration occurs within the DoD and with researchers performing studies not funded with Defense Health Program dollars. Existing knowledge products will be leveraged to make informed choices on research prioritization that will best serve warfighters and the Department's mission. DoD currently conducts funded research to understand the cognitive and non-cognitive requirements that are critical to performance in specific occupational fields. The findings of these studies will inform the feasibility of implementing evidence-based field assessment programs.

CONCLUSION

Warfighter brain health is a priority of the Department. The DoD supports promoting the readiness of its troops through a holistic mental health approach and the enhancement of warfighter brain health, and through prioritizing brain health knowledge advancement through funding, translating, and disseminating research findings into clinical practice and operational environments. The Department is addressing cognitive and non-cognitive assessments in the operational environment through existing policy and by building additional training and evaluation capabilities as outlined in JROCM. However, currently, research does not support use of cognitive or non-cognitive assessments to evaluate warfighter capabilities and mission readiness by field psychologists. Additional research, advancements in science, and knowledge translation is needed prior to widespread use of cognitive and non-cognitive assessments to advance warfighter capabilities.