

Program

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soldier who returned home and couldn't deal with the harrowing experiences of war.

"This story remind us that, even though these great Americans may end their service upon returning home, we cannot end our service to them," he said. "Our veterans must receive the physical and mental care they need and which they deserve for defending our freedom."

"The recent scandal regarding the lack of care our veterans at VA (Veterans Affairs) hospitals should outrage us all, and we should honor all our veterans and heroes by demanding an investigation and subsequent improvements to the VA system."

The entire VA health system needs an investigation, Ravensborg told the *Press & Dakotan*. "This started out in Arizona, and now it's spread to 20 states with a reported 40 veterans who have perished due to lack of care and oversight," he said.

South Dakota wasn't among states with facilities that raised red flags, Ravensborg said. He noted the Sioux Falls, Fort Meade and Hot Springs sites hold good reputations for care.

However, South Dakota faces other concerns, such as keeping the veteran's hospital in Hot Springs, he told the *Press & Dakotan*.

The small-town setting found in Hot Springs provides a good environment for providing veterans health care, he said. In addition, the facility can handle a number of particular needs and serve a divergent population, he said.

"They are dealing with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and alcoholism," he said. "They also deal with a large number of Native American veterans and are accessible for veterans from Wyoming and Nebraska."

The nation must also do a better job of making veterans aware of available services, Ravensborg said. At the same time, many veterans choose not to get the help they need, particularly for PTSD and similar issues, he said.

"We don't see they have a problem, because they hesitate to talk about those problems," he said. "Veterans need to know there are services available for those with mental health issues. The military is doing a better job of showing there's no stigma attached."

The nation's military is also moving into a new era when it comes to the war on terror, Ravensborg told the *Press & Dakotan*.

By serving in both war theaters, he has seen the difference between

Iraq and Afghanistan.

"When I did my tour in Iraq in 2004-05, they were just starting elections and rebuilding a very hostile area, but there was structure and the people were more moderate," he said.

"In Afghanistan, it was more tribal based. They didn't have the schools and infrastructure, so they had to build the schools to start offering education. They are light years behind in Afghanistan compared to Iraq. In Afghanistan, you need to rebuild the country."

A new geographic area may raise terrorism concerns, Ravensborg said.

He pointed to Africa, particularly Nigeria where Boko Haram kidnapped nearly 300 young women last month.

Nigeria is split between Christian and Islamic regions who alternate the nation's leadership and power, he said. Boko Haram holds a history of terrifying the nation, he added.

In addition, Nigeria supplies 8 percent of the United States' oil, which could play havoc with America's economy and energy supply, Ravensborg said.

The United States also needs to be concerned about the Sub-Sahara region, whose population will double by 2050 and holds the potential for terrorism, he added.

"We need stability in the region,"

he said. "We are seeing a growing Al Qaeda presence in those African regions."

Responding to the nation's enemies is nothing new, as South Dakotans have answered the call during all major conflicts since Memorial Day began, Ravensborg told Monday's audience.

"Through the years, South Dakota has sent its brave men and women off to battle. Some have come home veterans, some paid the ultimate price for our freedom, but they all came home heroes," he said.

"It is true: Freedom is not free. It is paid for by the blood, sweat and tears of our veterans and by all Americans working to keep our nation free from tyranny."

Through the present day, South Dakota has lost more than 35 heroes in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, Ravensborg said. Those heroes included members of the Yankton-based unit of the South Dakota National Guard, he added.

Those members have included SFC Richard Schild, SSG Dan Cuka, SGT Allen Kokesh Jr. and SSG Greg Wagner. In addition, SGT Corey Brist sustained traumatic brain injuries and other injuries, receiving extensive treatment before returning home.

"Hero' is not a term I use lightly. In society today, we think of heroes

as sports figures and movie stars, people that are glamorous. Now, while these people are admirable in their own ways, to me they are not heroes," Ravensborg said.

"Heroes are men and women who we rarely even know their names. They are men and women that show exceptional courage and bravery even when no one is watching. These individuals are not looking for medals or ribbons or any accolades. They are simply doing what is right so that we may all live freely."

These warriors didn't shy away from danger when their country needed them, Ravensborg said.

"They stepped forward and did their duty for all of us," he said. "Without the sacrifices of these brave men and women, we would not be able to assemble freely today and honor them as heroes."

Ravnsborg concluded with a quote from noted economist and soldier, Francis A. Walker, "We come, not to mourn our dead soldiers, but to praise them."

"Simply, today we honor our heroes and give them praise," Ravensborg said.

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