A Proposed Policy Analysis Methodology for Identifying and Modifying Policies with Mental Health Stigma Language

Sowmya Achanta, MPH, MBA, Alexandra Kelly, PhD, Janice Patterson, MPH, Christian Evans, MDiv, MA
Psychological Health Center of Excellence, Silver Spring, MD USA

BACKGROUND
- Only 29.3% of service members who reported a mental health (MH) concern in the past year sought or utilized treatment.1 Underutilization of MH services can be attributed to:
  - Attitudinal factors (beliefs related to stigma): negative attitudes about MH disorders and related care, fear of being treated differently by leadership and peers, fear of negative career impact.1
  - Logistical factors: scheduling conflicts, time off work, cost concerns, and transportation issues.1
- Over the last two years, the Psychological Health Center of Excellence (PHCoE) conducted a review of Department of Defense (DoD) and service-specific policies to identify content related to MH stigma.
- PHCoE analyzed over 300 active MH-related policies, identified over 100 stigma-reducing and/or stigma-increasing policies, and proposed language changes for MH-increasing policies.
- This proposed policy analysis methodology draws on strategies identified during this process, as well as RAND’s policy analysis methodology from its 2014 report titled, “Mental Health Stigma in the Military.”

OBJECTIVES
Objective 1: Identify at least 10 relevant search terms to use and at least three policy topics to consider when searching for policies that contain provisions that increase and/or reduce MH stigma.
Objective 2: Describe the proposed policy review process for identifying and assessing information pertaining to MH care and MH stigma within policies.
Objective 3: Delinate at least three steps of the validation of findings process.

METHODOLOGY

SOURCES FOR METHODOLOGY
- Due to limited published research on MH stigma in the military and the impact of institutional factors, sources include:
  - RAND Mental Health Stigma in the Military Report2
  - Psychological health subject matter experts (SME)
  - Anecdotal evidence from internal PHCoE, Real Warriors Campaign events

STEP ONE: POLICY SEARCH PROCESS

Policy Information Collection: Analysts should read through policies and use policy analysis spreadsheet (Table 1) to:
- Record policy information (e.g., document number) for ease of reference by other analysts
- Include brief description about policy and stigma-increasing/reducing provision
- Mark key search terms found in policy, so others can find provisions of interest

Assessment and Recommendation Development: Analysts should note following initial considerations. (See Supplemental Material for definitions):
- Audience
- Policy date
- Recently implemented policies
- Practical considerations
- Legal context
- Policy tone

Policy Topics: Policies about the following topics routinely address psychological fitness and MH, and should be prioritized:
- Enlistment
- Deployment
- Security and authorization
- Separations
- Military law
- Leadership/mentor training
- Medical health care and services
- MH programs

STEP TWO: POLICY REVIEW PROCESS

Policy Interpretation: Analysts should review policies and articulate the following:
- Stigma-increasing language excerpt
- Implications for stigma
- Proposed language changes, if applicable (minimal impact on meaning and policy wording, consider context surrounding provision)
- Proposed language change rationale
- Questions to discuss with other analysts and lead SME

Overarching Language Changes: To ensure consistency, uniform content should be developed for stigma-increasing language that appears in multiple policies (See Supplemental Material: Table 1 for detailed example).

Categorization of Policies: Analysts should place policies in one of three categories identified by RAND and PHCoE (Tables 2-4; see Supplemental Material: Tables 2-4 for category descriptions).3

REFERENCES