Defense Health Agency (DHA) Clinical Communities Speaker Series

2026 NOV CCSS: Healthcare Innovations: Catalyzing the Future of Patient Care Delivery

2026 NOV CCSS S03: Beyond Selection: Tools to Promote Long-Term Submariner Psychological Readiness and Retention

Resource List

The Brandon Act (2023) was signed into law on December 27, 2021, in honor of Navy Petty Officer 3rd Class Brandon Caserta, who died by suicide in 2018. It allows active-duty service members to self-initiate a referral for a mental health evaluation by requesting it through a commanding officer or supervisor of E-6 rank or above, for any reason, at any time, and in any environment. The Act creates a direct, stigma-reduced pathway for service members to seek mental health care, encouraging early intervention and reducing barriers to help-seeking. It also states that the Department of War provides annual training for both service members and supervisors on recognizing when a mental health evaluation is needed and how to process each request.

For military healthcare providers, DoW Instruction 6490.04: Mental health Evaluations of Service Members (2026) is critical because it standardizes the legal and clinical framework for assessing and managing mental health issues in the military population. It ensures that evaluations are conducted lawfully, with defined confidentiality limits, and that providers understand their authority, scope, and reporting requirements when working under command direction. This reduces ambiguity, supports consistent care, and helps providers balance clinical judgment with command responsibilities, ultimately improving both service member welfare and operational readiness.

Guidance on Policy and Strategic Actions for Mental Health and the Defense and Veteran's Sector (2025) recognizes that the choices made by leaders and institutions shape the environments in which people live and, in turn, the mental health of individuals and communities. However, mental health remains neglected, not only in health, but across many areas of government. This guidance aims to catalyze lasting change, helping to bring mental health from the margins to the mainstream of public policy and making it a core priority in building healthier, fairer, and more resilient societies.

This study was conducted by researchers from the Stressors and Support Experienced by Active-Duty U.S. Navy Sailors at Sea (2025) and surveyed 441 active-duty U.S. Navy Sailors who had completed at least 30 days underway. The study found that key stressors included loud noise, inability to rest when needed, limited access to quality mental and physical health care, and insufficient personnel to complete mission requirements. The authors recommend practical interventions such as noise mitigation, improved berthing conditions, sleep or watch-schedule changes, greater access to health care, and efforts to reduce stigma related to seeking mental health support. These findings can support discussion of tools that may promote psychological readiness and retention among submariners, who face many comparable stressors related to confinement, sustained workload, sleep disruption, and limited access to support.

Defense Health Agency (DHA) Clinical Communities Speaker Series

References

Brandon Act, 42 U.S.C. § 23-05. (2023). Self-initiated referral process for mental health evaluations of marines-the Brandon Act. https://www.marines.mil/News/Messages/Messages-Display/Article/3529205/self-initiated-referral-process-for-mental-health-evaluations-of-marines-the-br/

Hurtado, L. M., Harrison, E. M., Englert, R. M., Perez, V. G., Thomsen, C. J., & Schmied, E. A. (2025). *Stressors and support experienced by active-duty U.S. Navy sailors at sea.* Military Medicine, 190(7–8), e1655–e1662. https://doi.org/10.1093/milmed/usaf030

Office of the Under Secretary of War for Personnel and Readiness. (2026). DoW Instruction 6490.04: Mental health evaluations of Service Members. https://www.esd.whs.mil/Portals/54/Documents/DD/issuances/dodi/649004p.pdf

World Health Organization. (2025). Guidance on policy and strategic actions for mental health and the defense and veteran's sector. Geneva: World Health Organization; 2025 (Mental health and well-being across government sectors). License: CC BY-NC-SA 3.0 IGO. https://iris.who.int/server/api/core/bitstreams/6b481745-d9ef-468b-b588-d14626251dc9/content