

Social Workers Speak on Veterans Issues June 2009

The United States has been at war for more than eight years, with Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan beginning in 2001 and Operation Iraqi Freedom in 2003. During this time, more than 1.5 million troops have been deployed to serve in these wars.

Social workers continue to play an important role in the lives of veterans both during and after wartime. This fact sheet highlights some of the key considerations and concerns regarding social work services and veterans' issues

The Issues

Veterans are increasingly suffering from mental health conditions, homelessness and other problems.

Statistics show:

- More than 18 percent of troops who have served in Iraq and Afghanistan (nearly 300,000 people) have symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder or major depression.
- Individuals suffering from mental health and cognitive conditions are more likely to have other psychiatric diagnoses, are at increased risk for committing suicide, have higher rates of unhealthy behaviors (e.g., smoking, overeating, unsafe sex), and higher rates of physical health problems.
- As of March 2008, over 130,000 Iraq and Afghanistan war veterans had been diagnosed with a mental health disorder by the Department of Veterans Affairs mental health services.
- A November *CBS News* investigation found that 120 veterans of all wars kill themselves each week; over 5,000 per yearⁱ, while the VA estimates that each year 6,500 veterans kill themselves.
- Veterans comprise approximately 11 percent of the general population, yet make up 26 percent of the homeless population.

Women are serving in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan in larger numbers than ever before. Their service has significant implications on their children and families. Statistics show:

- More than 160,000 female soldiers have been deployed in the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, compared with only 7,500 that served in Vietnam. More than 100 women have died in both wars, and 600 have received purple hearts.
- The Service Women's Action Network states that "thousands of service women are harassed or sexually assaulted each year which contributes to significant mental health issues.

The demand for mental health services for veterans outweighs the supply of professionals.

- According to the Department of Defense Mental Health Task Force, the military has fewer mental health professionals now than it did when the United States invaded Iraq in 2003.
- As a result of shortages of mental health professionals, veterans seeking mental health care in 2007 received nearly one-third fewer visits with VA specialists compared to ten years earlier.

What Social Workers Believe

- NASW believes that urgent assistance to veterans and their families is required to help mitigate the long-term repercussions of war, and that social workers must be vigilant in advocating for and providing service to returning veterans.
- Government reinvestment in social work, particularly towards the efforts to recruit more social workers to the profession, will be necessary to meet the rising demand for social work services within both the active-duty military and veterans communities.
- Women veterans have unique and emerging needs, as more women have served in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan than in any other war. Women suffer from the same mental health conditions as male soldiers, but are often misdiagnosed. Social workers recognize the heightened need for services that women veterans will require, and are committed to providing services with this in mind.

How Social Workers Help

- Social workers have been serving veterans since 1926, when the first social work program in the Veterans Bureau was established.
- Social workers offer a variety of services to veterans and their families including resource navigation, crisis intervention, advocacy, benefit assistance, and mental health therapy for conditions such as depression, post traumatic stress disorder, and drug and alcohol addiction.
- The VA is the largest employer of master's-level social workers in the nation with social workers serving in every VA Medical Center, Veterans Center, and in many community-based clinics.
- NASW has endorsed Give an Hour, a nonprofit organization that is developing a national network of volunteers capable of responding to both acute and chronic conditions that arise within our society. NASW is encouraging licensed clinical social workers to donate their time to provide therapy and support to veterans across the country.
- Clinical Social Workers in the U.S. Public Health Service Commissioned Corps are driven by a passion for public service and work with patients in underserved and disadvantaged areas, respond to public health emergencies and natural disasters, and educate communities about health. As one of America's seven uniformed services, the Commissioned Corps fills essential public health leadership and service roles within the Nation's Federal Government agencies and programs.
- Social work experts on veterans and veterans related issues include [Raymond Scurfield](#), DSW, [Kristen Day](#), MSW, [LeslieBeth Wish](#), MSS, and [Susan Evans](#), LICSW.



NASW's Partnership with Give an Hour

Give an Hour is a non-profit organization that has created a national network of licensed mental health providers who have agreed to give one hour of their time each week to provide free counseling and other mental health services to military members, veterans and their families. Last fall, NASW partnered with Give an Hour with a goal to recruit 5000 licensed clinical social workers as volunteers. This partnership is an important first step in the effort to meet the needs of veterans nationwide. Currently, nearly one-third of all Give an Hour volunteers are professional social workers. For more information, or if you would like to become a Give an Hour volunteer, please visit www.giveanhour.org

What Social Workers are Saying

- **PTSD is caused by external factors:** *"PTSD is the only disorder that comes from outside your body or your mind," said **George Lawson**, a licensed clinical social worker and member of the Veterans Affairs PTSD Outreach Team, based at the Fort Defiance Hospital. "Other disorders may be due to a chemical imbalance inside the body, but PTSD comes from being exposed to a traumatic environment or war zone. Most veterans feel like there's something wrong with them. Family or friends will say to get over it. A counselor would not say that. It would be like erasing a part of a person's life experience."* (May 3, 2009. Farmington Daily Times. "PTSD options available for Navajo veterans")
- **Veterans families are also affected by war:** *"It is not just the veteran that faces challenges when they return from combat," said **Darla Darville**, the [Portland VA Medical Center] program's social worker. "Family support and understanding is important to the returning veteran."* (Apr. 8, 2009. The Statesman Journal. "Portland VA offers free support group for families of veterans")
- **Veterans often suffer from multiple mental ailments:** *"For many combat veterans, the problem is compounded by multiple mental ailments, according to **Keith Armstrong**, a licensed clinical social worker at the San Francisco Veteran Affairs Medical Center. "Typically what happens with events you don't like [such as combat] is you avoid them," he said. "And you end up perpetuating problems."* (Nov. 11, 2008. The Washington Post. "Homecoming Veterans Often Face Inner Challenge")
- **More on the stress of combat:** *"The stress differs depending on a soldier's proximity to the fight, says **James Martin**, a professor of social work at Bryn Mawr College, retired Army colonel and expert on military culture. "The physical stress associated with being shot at in combat is a different kind of stress than the emotional stress of the leader who is sending the folks out this way," Martin says. "It's the difference of being in a car accident and witnessing it."* (Nov. 25, 2008 USA Today, "General's Story Puts Focus on Stress Stemming from Combat")
- **Women veterans have unique needs :** *"It's astounding the number of women coming to the Veteran's Center who have been in Iraq and Afghanistan," says **Mary Baker**, a licensed clinical social worker [in California] . "One of the differences [for women] is the way the veterans are perceived. It's not uncommon for men to be asked if they're veterans, but it's rare for that same question to be posed to women. Women are and will continue to be in combat zones. And they suffer the emotional consequences of that experience -- just like their male counterparts. Typically, the men are diagnosed with post traumatic stress disorder, while women are diagnosed with anxiety and depression, [but] it's the same thing. Warriors are warriors and they all go through the same emotional issues,"* (Nov. 11, 2008. The Times-Standard. (Eureka, CA) "Women in Military: Opportunities and Challenges")

Additional Resources

www.socialworkreinvestment.org

www.socialworkportal.org

www.helpstartshere.org

www.socialworkers.org/research

www.giveanhour.org

<http://workforce.socialworkers.org>

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About the National Association of Social Workers

The National Association of Social Workers (NASW), in Washington, D.C., is the largest membership organization of professional social workers with nearly 150,000 members. It promotes, develops, and protects the practice of social work and social workers. NASW also seeks to enhance the well-being of individuals, families, and communities through its advocacy.