

Social Work & Veterans

General Background

The needs of the nation's veterans are changing, and as such, the profession of social work and the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) are adapting to this population's changing needs and increased demand for social work services. Social workers have been serving veterans since 1926, when the first social work program in the Veterans Bureau was established. Today, the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) is the largest employer of master's-degreed social workers in the nation. 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. Social workers in the Department of Veterans Affairs also ensure continuity of care through admission, evaluation, treatment, and follow-up processes. Social workers serve in every VA Medical Center, Vet Center and in many community-based clinics where they provide assessment, crisis intervention, high-risk screening, discharge planning, case management, advocacy, and education to veterans and their families.

In past wars, service members lacked access to sophisticated medical technology and advanced body armor and often died from combat-related injuries. According to an April 2008 RAND report, many more service members in Iraq and Afghanistan are surviving experiences that would have led to death in prior wars. This is, however, leading to new casualties which are emerging in the form of mental health conditions and cognitive health impairments.¹

The RAND report also states that over 18 percent of troops who have served in Iraq and Afghanistan, nearly 300,000 troops, have symptoms of post-traumatic stress or major depression. Additionally, about 19 percent of service members reported that they experienced a possible traumatic brain injury. One-third of those previously deployed suffer from depression, post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), or traumatic brain injury (TBI), and about five percent suffer symptoms of all three.

Women in the military face a unique set of challenges including possible discrimination, harassment, or assault. The Service Women's Action Network states that "thousands of service women are harassed or sexually assaulted each year. Many don't report incidents for fear that they will be ignored, exposed or punished."² *VA Research Currents* published in 2008 that military sexual trauma leads to a 59 percent higher risk for mental health problems.³ The multiple traumas of war and abuse or assault result in increasing cases of mental health illness. More than one-third of the 23,635 women veterans who served in Afghanistan or Iraq and were evaluated at VA health facilities between 2002 and 2006 had a preliminary diagnosis of a mental disorder (Service Women's Action Network, 2007). Women account for 14 percent, or a total of 27,000 recent veterans treated for PTSD (Give an Hour, 2008).⁴

Recommendations

- Ensure a workforce equipped to care for our veterans' physical, mental, and behavioral health needs.
- Adequately treat the invisible wounds of the military and veterans.
- Address the mental health needs of military families.
- Improve health care for female veterans.
- End veteran homelessness.

References

- ¹ Jaycox, Lisa H., & Tanielian, Terri. (Eds.) (2008). *Invisible Wounds of War Psychological and Cognitive Injuries, Their Consequences, and Services to Assist Recovery*. RAND. Center for Military Health Policy Research
- ² Service Women's Action Network. (2007). *What Every Girl Needs to Know About the U.S. Military*. Retrieved February 25, 2009 from www.servicewomen.org.
- ³ VA screenings yield data on military and sexual trauma. *VA Research Currents*, Nov-Dec 2008. 1, 5-6.
- ⁴ Give an Hour. (2008). Press Kit. Retrieved on May 15, 2009 from www.giveanhour.org.

Additional Resources

Kelly, J. (2009, April). We Have Much to Offer Veterans. *NASW NEWS*, 54(4).

United States Department of Veterans Affairs. (2009). *VA Social Work*. www.socialwork.va.gov/.