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Guardsmen's PTSD issues are raised for health caregivers

NASHUA – On the eve of the largest deployment ever of New Hampshire National Guard personnel, the city hosted a conference to train mental illness caregivers on how to identify issues the guardsmen may face when they return home: Post traumatic stress disorder or traumatic brain injury.

One of the biggest obstacles, professionals say, is getting veterans to admit they need help.

"Stigma is not something that happens to people in uniform. Stigma is a norm in American society," said Dr. Matthew Friedman, a national expert on PTSD and one of the speakers at the conference Tuesday at Nashua Country Club.

People will go on talk shows to discuss their heart attacks but shy away from talking about depression, said Friedman, executive director of the National Center for PTSD at the U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs.

That's particularly true for veterans who equate acknowledging stress to acknowledging weakness, Friedman told a roomful of therapists, case managers, counselors and nurse practitioners.

The conference attracted 165 registrants and was co-sponsored by the New Hampshire Department of Health and Human Services and the Greater Nashua Mental Health Center.

The conference also included comments by Dr. Thomas McAllister of Dartmouth-Hitchcock Medical Center, a national expert on brain injury, and Maj. Roy Hunter of the New Hampshire National Guard. Hunter spoke of his experiences in Afghanistan and difficulty adjusting to life when he returned to the states. Among those: flinching whenever he heard fireworks or a car backfiring.

"I see this as a building of a military and civilian partnership," said Jo Moncher, bureau chief of community-based military programs for the state Health and Human Services Department.

That partnership will become more important next year, when 1,000 New Hampshire guardsmen will be deployed, with all at this point expected to be sent to Afghanistan, said Col. Carolyn Protzmann, joint chief of staff for the New Hampshire National Guard.

That will be the largest single group ever deployed from New Hampshire, Protzmann said.

The conference was important for professionals to understand issues soldiers, airmen and guardsmen may face when they return, said Maj. Richard Oberman, deputy state surgeon with the New Hampshire Army National Guard.

It will also help professionals to know the right questions to ask to determine if their patients are veterans who may be eligible for benefits, Oberman said.

"They don't come in wearing this uniform," said Oberman, who was dressed in military fatigues.

Professionals who work with veterans learned lessons from the Vietnam War, Friedman said.

Those include preventing families from breaking up, preventing soldiers from withdrawing socially and isolating themselves and preventing alcohol and substance abuse, Friedman said.

Also, veterans should be encouraged to connect with other returning veterans, Friedman said.

"It's not rocket science, but it's extremely important," he said.

New Hampshire is unique among states in having state-run mental health programs specifically for veterans, Moncher said.

While the Greater Nashua Mental Health Center stepped up to co-host the first such training conference, Moncher said her department hopes to host others throughout the state in order to "expand the number of people trained to recognize and treat PTSD."

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