

Story originally printed in the Tomah Journal or online at www.tomahjournal.com

Published - Thursday, November 05, 2009

Column: Don't neglect mental health services for vets

By John A. Scocos

Veterans Day in Wisconsin is a special moment of reflection for the more than 427,000 veterans in this state. Their service spans not only the last century but also reaches into the 21st century.

As I reflect on my second deployment to Iraq I am acutely aware of the physical, mental, and psychological costs borne by our military men and women currently serving in our country's conflicts. And these costs do not end with their active duty assignments. Reintegration bears its own costs, as veterans attempt to resume their varied roles in civilian life and society: mother, father, son, daughter, friend, employee, student, etc. I can tell you from personal experience that, even under the best of circumstances, this transition is a difficult one.

Of the veterans living in the state, the number includes the 128,273 Wisconsinites who joined the ranks of deployed or returning veterans since the Persian Gulf War (August, 1990). During the most recent U.S. military conflicts (i.e., Persian Gulf War, Somalia, Afghanistan, and Iraq) current figures show that Wisconsin lost more than 114 of its daughters and sons (as of 10/26/2009). A current estimate of Wisconsin's disabled veteran population indicates that greater than 51,210 individuals suffer some degree of disability related to their military duty, and trend analyses reveal an increasing rate of physical and mental health disorders for personnel deployed in service for the Iraq and Afghanistan conflicts.

It is clear that these individuals have paid a great cost for our freedom. Know that their families and communities have paid a price as well. And, for their service, their personal loss, and their families' and communities' losses we are grateful and we owe them. But, also be aware that we all will continue to pay a price if we do not provide these service members with the tools needed to reintegrate themselves into our communities in a positive and healthy way. By any account, the level of funding and the amount of care available and accessed is sadly short of the need.

At the most fundamental level, positive reintegration requires mental health assessment and opportunities for meaningful work or job training. Though we can always do better, Wisconsin continues to make great strides in providing educational opportunities for veterans.

Unfortunately, the same cannot be said with respect to mental health and support for returning veterans and their families. Recent research reports acknowledge that soldiers returning with musculoskeletal and mental health disorders typically receive fewer benefits than those with cardiovascular or neurological conditions. Currently and historically, military men and women often do not seek out help, particularly for mental health difficulties, on their own. A recent study at Walter Reed Army Medical Center involving over 6,100 army personnel and marines indicates that of those troops returning from duty in Iraq or Afghanistan that are positive for mental health disorders, only between 23-40 percent actually seek help. Collectively, other research reports provide a grim picture of the ongoing costs of human suffering and opportunity lost for our returning veterans, their families, and our communities:

* 25-40 percent of returning veterans experience a mental health disorder with rates highest among national guard and reserve components.

* U.S. Army suicide rates are at an all time high (during Iraq and Afghanistan conflicts).

* Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), Traumatic Blast Injury (TBI), and depression are greater than in previous conflicts (during Iraq and Afghanistan conflicts)

* Substance abuse and domestic violence are tightly associated with PTSD, TBI, and depression and are a primary cause of separation and divorce for military families.

If we do not connect with our military personnel upon their arrival back to Wisconsin and follow up with needed physical, mental, and educational information, programs, and interventions we, as a society, are likely to pay for their service for a very long time. It is the right thing to do and the fiscally responsible thing to do. Freedom has a cost that we all bear.

Recently, I had the opportunity to attend the Wisconsin Warrior Summit held at the War Memorial Center in Milwaukee. This conference was for mental health professionals, community organizations, veterans, and their families. The conference organizers were Dryhootch and the Mental Health Community of Wisconsin. Dryhootch, located in Milwaukee, is a veterans outreach program made up of a group of Vietnam veterans who have dedicated themselves to working with returning veterans.

Less than one percent of the population of the United States is currently serving in the armed forces. As a state, and as a nation, we need to find the resources to fund programs that benefit veterans. When we benefit our veterans we also benefit their families, our communities, and our society as a whole.

On this Veterans Day, it is time to recognize and act on our commitment to our veterans. Their service and sacrifice, in a very real sense, make them this era's Greatest Generation.

John A. Scocos serves as the Secretary of the Wisconsin Department of Veterans Affairs.

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