

NIH Conference with BG Sutton Explores Trauma's Impact on Families

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Story by Elaine Wilson

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BETHESDA - The nation must move beyond the "suck it up and drive on" military culture of the past and look to a future that puts psychological and spiritual injuries on par with physical ones, the Army's highest-ranking psychiatrist said yesterday.

"We must pay attention to the whole person, the whole family, the whole community, the whole nation," said Army Brig. Gen. (Dr.) Loree K. Sutton, director of the Defense Centers of Excellence for Psychological Health and Traumatic Brain Injury. "It's about building resilience. It's about fostering recovery, and supporting reintegration into communities across this country."

Sutton spoke at the Trauma Spectrum Disorders Conference at the National Institutes of Health here. The two-day conference -- sponsored by the departments of Defense and Veterans Affairs and NIH -- focused on the impact of trauma spectrum disorders on military and veteran families and caregivers throughout the deployment lifecycle. Trauma spectrum disorders, or TSD, comprise a broad range of psychological health and traumatic brain injury issues.

The conference examined TSD's impact on family functioning, care-giving and child and adolescent development. It brought together researchers and practitioners "to collaborate, to reach out into the future and identify next-generation solutions," the general said.

"For many of our warriors, coming home is not the end of the war -- far from it," Sutton said in a published letter to her colleagues. "Leaving the battlefield far behind, the battle often continues - in hearts and minds, relationships and communities after deployment. Families and caregivers often find themselves fighting a battle too, striving to understand and support the person they love following a life-changing experience."

Sutton cited the need for a cultural transformation with an underlying message she called "simple, yet powerful."

"It has to do with singing from the mountaintops, putting the word out there to those whom you serve: you are not alone, we are all in this together, treatment works, and the sooner we can intervene, the better," she said.

Caregivers also must reach out to family members, to co-workers, to community leaders, to peers and to clinical experts, she added. "Reaching out is an act of courage and strength."

Sutton said collaborative efforts like this conference are vital. The issues confronting service members and their families extend far beyond the military's scope.

"We know that this set of issues and concerns, it's much bigger than any of us within the Department of Defense ... it's much bigger than the federal government," the general said. "It stems across the country and around the world, to our communities to our faith leaders, to our educators, to our employers, and of course, linking together with our policy makers, our decision-makers, focused on the health and well-being of those we are so privileged to serve."

Patty Shinseki, wife of VA Secretary Eric K. Shinseki, also called for a collaborative effort to help service members and their families.

"It is my belief that the importance of educating communities across the country to increase awareness and encourage us all to join hands at every level, including neighbor to neighbor, to offer understanding and sustained assistance is critical to the long-term health and well-being of service members, veterans and their families," Shinseki said yesterday.

Shinseki, a 38-year military spouse and member of the Military Child Education Coalition's board of directors, lauded service members and their families for their service and sacrifice.

"I am awestruck by the ability of those who serve currently to persevere and to manage the challenges during these unprecedented times," she said. "It is also heartening to note the abundance of support and resources available to them."

Sutton said the conference's aim was to improve that support. "Together, we're on this journey," she said, "and today marks an important milestone in that journey."