

# University of Michigan Using Buddy System to Help Vets With PTSD

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Some soldiers returning from war in Iraq and Afghanistan wage a different kind of battle to reintegrate into the U.S. Some suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), but might not know they have it or how to deal with it.

There are over 300,000 veterans of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan with PTSD.

Years into both wars, organizations are partnering with leading universities to help veterans not only find a way out of PTSD, but to integrate back into society.

In early January, the McCormick Foundation gave the University of Michigan's (UM) Depression Center and Department of Psychiatry \$350,000 toward addressing the "invisible brain injuries" among returning Iraqi and Afghanistan veterans and their family members.

"Many times people are having symptoms and they don't want to ask for help," said Jane Spinner, project officer for Strategic Initiatives at the UM Depression Center, and administrative head of the Welcome Back Veterans initiative at UM. "There's a fear of asking for help, that they might be perceived as weak, that it might jeopardize future jobs in the military."

UM's program uses a buddy-to-buddy system where a vet reaches out to other vets. A veteran calls a central number and gets matched with another veteran, who is a volunteer, who then links him or her with a resource.

They currently have 22 volunteers, both male and female, who have fought in Iraq, Afghanistan, Vietnam, and the Gulf War. They are also sending buddies out to armories throughout the state of Michigan. Rather than treating or diagnosing, the buddies simply help vets make connections with resources. The program's goal is to cover the entire state of Michigan—but for that they need more veterans.

"That connection that person serves goes a long way in helping people overcome stigma," said Ms. Spinner.

The money UM was awarded from the McCormick Foundation went toward a larger fundraising initiative dubbed Welcome Back Veterans. The initiative was created by New York Mets Chairman and CEO Fred Wilpon to give returning veterans quality evaluations, treatment, support systems, and

long-term employment assistance.

The program works in partnership with Major League Baseball Charities and the McCormick Foundation through a network of university hospitals to address the mental health needs of our veterans and their families. The three core Centers for Veterans Mental Health are within the Department of Psychiatry at Weill-Cornell Medical College of Cornell University, the University of Michigan Depression Center and Department of Psychiatry, and the Stanford University Department of Psychiatry.

The goal of the programs is to serve as replicable models for other civilian medical centers around the U.S., and the three centers talk on a monthly basis to share best practices.

“Our faculty had expertise in peer to peer programs and doing different kinds of outreach—there was already experience in developing this kind of program,” said Ms. Spinner.

Stanford and Cornell have set up clinics, while Michigan is looking at outreach to “overcome the stigma barrier to get people into treatment.”

**Resources online:**

[U-M Depression Center](#)

[Buddy-to-Buddy program](#)

[Real Warriors Campaign and DCoE](#)

[Welcome Back Veterans](#)