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Veterans get more mental-health help from other agencies

Sept. 24--To get soldiers the behavioral-health services they need, Fort Bliss has had to reach for a helping hand itself.

A growing population of active-duty soldiers, thousands of whom have returned in recent months from combat in Iraq, and a mandate to provide behavioral-health screenings for returning soldiers taxed the post's resources and led hundreds of soldiers to be referred to behavioral-health care providers throughout El Paso.

Soldiers returning from deployment who have been identified as being at risk for post-traumatic stress disorder and other behavioral health problems are now greeted on the airfield by a licensed behavioral health specialist. In addition, every soldier is given a behavioral-health evaluation before going on leave.

"When we had to meet the requirements of that mission, we had to divert providers who were therapists to that screening mission, and at that point, so that soldiers weren't waiting an inordinate length of time to get appointments for counseling, we referred those soldiers to the network," said John Fortunato, assistant chief of the Department of Behavioral Health at Beaumont Army Medical Center.

At its peak, about 580 soldiers were referred to local health-care providers. That number has been reduced to about 300 because Beaumont has been able to shift its staff back to normal operations and take on more patients.

Soldiers referred to private behavioral-health care providers have their progress monitored by case managers

employed by the Army.

"They're doing things like ensuring that they get appointments, that they keep the appointments, getting progress reports from the providers because we will need to make decisions about that soldier's future," Fortunato said. "We still have to ensure that the soldier is on our radar and getting proper care."

Family Services of El Paso was one of the providers that took referrals from Beaumont. Executive Director Richard Salcido said that the center had accepted at least 30 referrals.

So that it could treat so many soldiers, Family Services of El Paso sought special funding from United Way of El Paso and received \$2,700. Family Services will also have a charity Bingo

fundraiser, "Help Our Heroes Heal," on from 6 to 10 p.m. Nov. 5 at the Bingo Plus Bingo Parlor, 6369 Montana.

"One of the things that has happened, we've gotten so many referrals that I don't have enough Blue Cross Blue Shield therapists to serve them all," Salcido said. "So I have to assign them to some of those therapists who are not credentialed, and we can't bill Blue Cross Blue Shield for it and we can't charge the soldiers for it either."

Blue Cross Blue Shield is subcontracted by TriWest Health Alliance to provide insurance services for military personnel in the area.

Soldiers returning from war zones can face a range of behavioral health issues such as depression, anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorder.

"What I find a lot is the survivor's guilt. A lot of the soldiers feel guilty about living when they've lost comrades in Iraq or Afghanistan," said Monica McGowan, a licensed counselor at Family Services of El Paso. "You have to help them process that. A lot of times there's nothing they could have done to save that person, so you kind of help them see it from a different perspective -- appreciating their life and just helping them accept that they can't change the situation."

While many soldiers are seeking help coping with combat stress and the loss of friends, for others, coming home amounts to almost as daunting a challenge as being deployed.

"It's very important that we all not think they're all coming back with PTSD because that's not the case," said Griselda Villalobos, a licensed clinical social worker at Family Services of El Paso. "A lot of the issues that we're seeing are issues that everybody goes through but they become compounded with the fact that they've just returned from Iraq and so we're having to deal with just regular family issues within the context of a returning soldier."