

Minnesota National Guard officials confront mental health stigma ahead of deployment

by Jessica Mador, Minnesota Public Radio
March 9, 2011

AUDIO

Minnesota National Guard officials confront mental health stigma ahead of deployment (feature audio)

St. Paul, Minn. — It's been almost four years since Coon Rapids Army Reservist Molly Black returned from Iraq but she still thinks about her deployment at least a dozen times a day.

"We lost two people over there," she said. "A few more have lost limbs or are paralyzed now, so that stuff sticks with you. You have survivor's guilt."

For more than a year, the 30-year-old was based in northern Iraq where she helped train Iraqi police. She remembers the day insurgents attacked her unit with a car bomb.

"It was about 8 o'clock in the morning and a 1500-pound vehicle-borne IED [improvised explosive device] drove through the entrance and exploded," she said.

The explosion was followed by an avalanche of gunfire, mortar and rocket attacks from all directions that collapsed the building. The attack killed almost two dozen people.

Black has been in the military for more than eight years. She knows daily violence comes with the territory. But she still struggles with its effects.

When her unit returned home, Black says commanders talked only briefly about the potential for lingering mental health problems.

"You're back, this is awesome, good job, you're on your own," she said.

She feels lucky that her friends saw danger signs of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD): She was depressed and irritable, she drank too much and stopped going out. Since then, she's gotten treatment and it's helping.

About 2,400 soldiers from the Minnesota Army National Guard will deploy to Kuwait this summer as part of Operation New Dawn, the final drawdown of U.S. forces from Iraq. Research has shown that combat can have a long-term effect on the mental health of soldiers.

Minnesota military officials want to use the knowledge they've gained from almost ten years of war to help soldiers and their families prepare for this deployment.

Studies have shown that Guard and Reserve soldiers may be more vulnerable to combat-related problems than their active duty counterparts. Researchers say this could be partly because of their status as civilian soldiers who don't have the support of an active military base.

To give Guard troops the support and prevent future problems, spokesman Lt. Col. Kevin Olson said the Minnesota National Guard is confronting the stigma around mental health more aggressively.

"It's not a comfortable topic to deal with. Many people have had first-hand experience with it and they may be reluctant to talk about it," he said. "But we want to overcome that reluctance so that our soldiers, our airmen, their leaders are talking about this difficult issue."

Olson says the Guard has also learned from recent V.A. studies showing that training can help soldiers be more resilient to PTSD and other problems. And the Guard requires all deploying service members to attend special workshops designed to help prepare them and their families for deployment.

But sometimes training isn't enough.

Metropolitan State University's Bruce Holzschuh works with students in the military and is a veteran. He counsels deploying students to be ready for anything.

"You might have a vision before you leave of what it is going to be like and then you get there and it's completely different. Just be prepared," he says. "You have to be flexible and be prepared for the surprise, I guess."

Since more than half the Guard soldiers going to Kuwait this year are on their first deployment, that may be good advice.

Recommend 108 people recommend this. Be the first of your friends.

Broadcast Dates

All Things Considered, 03/09/2011, 4:49 p.m.

SPONSORS