

## New Pasadena program offers hope to vets and their families

By Janette Williams, Staff Writer

Posted: 06/23/2011 05:38:53 PM PDT

PASADENA - As the U.S. begins troop draw-downs in Iraq and Afghanistan this summer, and longed-for homecomings happen for more area military families, one local mental health group is taking a clear-eyed look at the challenges they can face.

"Front Line," a new program from the Pasadena-based San Gabriel Valley NAMI - National Alliance for Mental Illness - is now offering free care, resources and advocacy to families whose veterans show signs of mental illness.

"It's geared to those who are not suffering (mental illness) but want to understand and develop skills and tools to help people they care about," said Mary Ann Schemdin, president of the all-volunteer SGV-NAMI.

"As we know, mental illness affects everyone in the environment," she said. "Families, girlfriends, boyfriends, someone's best friend from childhood they're still close to."

Schemdin cited First Lady Michelle Obama's advocacy for returning veterans, and said the need will only grow.

"If we can help the vets coming back and understand them, and channel support and get them on the right pathway, they will have much, much heightened quality of life than they would if they're abandoned," she said. "That's what we're trying to do."

Schemdin said she got a first-hand account of

what returning vets face during a three-hour lay-over in Chicago last fall.

She got into conversation with a young man, a veteran of several tours in Iraq and Afghanistan, on

medication for PTSD, who opened up to her on the challenges returning vets face in trying to create a "normal life."

It made her realize how deep the need was for such an effort, Schemdin said.

"This support group is for anyone," she said. "We have daughters of women who served who experience PTSD and don't know how to cope with their mothers' erratic behavior, paranoia, jumping when they hear loud noises - things ordinary people do not necessarily experience."

Former Sgt. First Class Denita Hartfield said she has experienced all of that, and found help at NAMI's Front Line program in Kern County.

The 36-year-old veteran said she joined the military in 1992, and returned in 2007 to her home in Bakersfield a different person.

Friends and family, concerned about her nightmares, "hyper vigilance" and other

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symptoms of PTSD, looked for help on-line and found Front Line, she said.

"Family member are readily able to identify symptoms you don't recognize in yourself ... things you weren't able to talk about," said Hartfield, who is "doing fine" and now counsels others in the program.

"We see mothers, fathers, husbands, wives, even some cases sons and daughters, who say `My veteran hasn't slept in three days,'" she said. "We're the last people who will see it in ourselves."

The all-volunteer NAMI group in Pasadena is part of a "spectacular organization" of 30 years with about 300,000 members, said Alex Kopelowicz, associate professor of psychiatry at UCLA and a recent guest speaker for the local branch.

"It's by far the largest, most powerful advocacy group for the mentally ill in this country," Kopelowicz said.

Their group programs offer "caring and hearing," he said, and a chance to share the day-to-day experience of living with a mentally ill family member.

The Front Line program is a "natural outgrowth" for the group, he said.

SGV NAMI, which operates its programs \$35,000 annual budget, is offering Front Line on the first and third Tuesday of the month.

For more information, go to [sgvnami.org](http://sgvnami.org), call 626-664-0779 or the NAMI office at 626-577-6697 for the current program location.

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