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Wellness

Vet Families Can Access Mental Health Tools Online

by [Jessica Glenza](#) (email) 12/20/11

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Veterans stand during the Town of Cortlandt's Veterans Day ceremony in November.

Photo Credit: [Jessica Glenza](#)

MONTROSE, N.Y. – The VA Medical Center in Montrose has become the epicenter for a new online veteran's mental health initiative. "Family of Heroes" is a website which uses avatars, realistic animations of people, to allow people to anonymously work through conversations with veterans recently returned from deployment.

"We're trying to help families attain some skills," said Benny Linneman, a therapist for residents of the Montrose VA. "A lot of vets think the problem is theirs, and that they can deal with it," he said about veterans afflicted with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). The program was launched on Veterans Day, Nov. 11.

"Family of Heroes" is meant to provide those who know a veteran recently returned from deployment with the skills to defuse arguments, approach a veteran who may need help and recognize signs of PTSD. The metropolitan area has about 34,000 veterans home from theaters of war, according to Linneman, and there are about two million veterans nationwide who served in both the Iraq and Afghanistan theaters.

"Family of Heroes" is only available to residents of southern New York and New Jersey as it undergoes development.

According to Linneman, stressors for veterans returning home from a theater of war can run the gamut of what civilians consider everyday activities. Difficulty driving, dealing with packages or garbage (which in Iraq or Afghanistan may indicate explosives) and behavioral changes in the veteran can all be difficult for friends and extended family of veterans to understand.

Julie Kelly, a military wife and veteran suicide-prevention advocate, said there is almost no training for friends and extended family of veterans. Kelly says immediate family members are debriefed by the military regarding a homecoming veteran's experiences abroad. Frequent encounters with live fire or casualties the veteran may have witnessed are all subjects of debriefing. Extended family



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members, employers and friends do not have the benefit of this training and information.

More than kids and spouses, said Kelly, "families need to understand," what a veteran could be experiencing. After reviewing "Family of Heroes," Kelly said she believes it will be a great tool for "reserve families. They don't have a lot of tools right now." Kelly also said she believes the more preventative tools the military can offer families, the better.

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