

Step up to help military families

Volunteer groups and nonprofits give psychologists several ways to donate their services.

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By Christopher Munsey

Monitor Staff

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More psychologists are needed to [help service members, veterans and their families](#) who are struggling to cope with the stresses of deployment, the trauma of combat and the pain of reintegration, said Barbara Van Dahlen, PhD, a clinical psychologist who founded the nonprofit organization Give an Hour in 2005.



“There’s never been a time in our country when mental health professionals were needed in the way they’re needed now, to lead an effort to take care of the men, women and families who serve our country,” Van Dahlen said.

Van Dahlen presented with Jaine Darwin, PsyD, co-founder and co-director of SOFAR (Strategic Outreach to Families of All Reservists) and Rear Adm. (ret.) Frank Gallo, national executive director of the Armed Services YMCA (<http://www.asymca.org/>) at a State Leadership Conference session on responding to the military’s mental health needs.

The psychologists pointed to growing needs within the military community for psychological services:

- About 18 percent of the more than 2.2 million service members deployed to Afghanistan since 2001 and Iraq since 2003 — or about 300,000 service members — have developed severe [depression](#) or [post-traumatic stress](#) since they returned to the United States.
- The [suicide](#) rate among the Army's active-duty soldiers hit its highest rate in history in 2009, exceeding the comparable civilian suicide rate for the first time since the Vietnam War. The suicide rate for Guard and Reserve service members almost doubled last year, Van Dahlen said.
- More than 320,000 service members have suffered a traumatic brain injury.
- [Addiction](#) to prescription painkillers might be developing as the next public health crisis caused by the war, said Darwin. Military health providers issued 3.3 million prescriptions for painkillers to service members in 2010, compared with 864,000 prescriptions in 2002, she said.
- Many service members have deployed several times to Iraq and Afghanistan, creating strains as families endure long separations, which are linked to increased behavioral and academic problems for their children.

Responding to those needs, Give an Hour has gradually developed and trained a volunteer pool of about 5,300 licensed mental health professionals who donate an hour of services a week over a year's time to a service member, veteran or family member. The network, which Van Dahlen wants to significantly expand, complements services offered by U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs and Department of Defense providers.

Volunteers have provided almost 37,000 hours of care since the first free session was held in July 2007, she said.

Van Dahlen is now one of the architects of a nationwide effort to develop a free online guide that helps communities organize and coordinate assistance for service members, veterans and their families. The "Community Blueprint" guide, slated to be launched this spring, suggests steps to address behavioral health, education, employment, family strength, financial and legal problems, homelessness, reintegration, and volunteerism needs within local communities.

"We need the mental health community to help coordinate this effort," she said.

SOFAR is another organization that gives psychologists a way to donate their time and expertise to help military families.

Started in 2004, her group concentrates its efforts on trying to reach some of the 785,000 members of the Guard and Reserve mobilized for deployments to Afghanistan and Iraq in the past 10 years, Darwin said. Many of these families live in rural communities and don't have easy access to the support structure available to families living on or near military bases, she said.

SOFAR offers therapy for Guard and Reserve service members and their families on an individual basis, especially during the reintegration process when a service member returns from deployment, Darwin said.

To reach those families, SOFAR volunteers attend meetings of the Family Readiness Groups set up to support the families of deployed units. Volunteers give talks on coping with the stresses of separation, and make themselves available for follow-up consultations, she said.

Along with expertise and a willingness to help, volunteers need to learn about military culture, and the cycles of training, deployment and reintegration that service members and their families experience, she said.

“Our organizing principle is, when a soldier deploys, the whole family serves, and when a soldier returns, the whole family is impacted,” Darwin said.

For its part, the Armed Services YMCA operates 150 program centers concentrated in and around military bases across the nation. Aimed at the families of junior enlisted service members, the programs cover a wide variety of needs, Gallo said.

Funded by a \$24 million annual budget, the Armed Services YMCA helps students from military families adjust to new schools, runs discussion groups for spouses of deployed service members, picks up “latch-key” kids living off base with a shuttle bus for afterschool programs and provides drop-in day-care for medical appointments at military hospitals. The group also pays for 18-month memberships at community YMCA’s for families of deployed Guard and Reserve service members, Gallo said.

APA and the YMCA of the USA are partnered in an ongoing effort to deliver workshops on healthy living at local YMCAs.

For all the talk that many Americans give about “supporting the troops,” Gallo said most people outside the military don’t understand the cumulative burden of deployments on military families.

“We create these single-parent families, with the additional problem that somebody’s liable to come back banged up, or not come back at all ... some of their sacrifice, a lot of people don’t understand,” he said.