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Back home, veterans fight different kind of war

Many traumatized but reluctant to use free mental health care

By Alex Parker
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Lynne Tylke remembers asking an **Iraq war** veteran in her office to relive his worst day: He and a friend were in a vehicle that exploded after hitting a land mine. His friend, who had offered to switch places and drive, was killed.

Racked with guilt when he came home and unable to process the experience, the soldier started taking heroin and cocaine, said Tylke, a Chicago-based clinical social worker and volunteer with the Soldiers Project, an organization that provides free mental health counseling to Iraq and **Afghanistan** veterans.

"He was just completely grief-stricken, guilty, overwhelmed, just unable to integrate that experience," said Tylke. "I try to gently sit with them, to calm down their conscious reaction, so they can feel what it is they're so overwhelmed by."

The Soldiers Project was founded in **Los Angeles** in 2004 to help soldiers manage their many mental health problems. Nearly 20 percent of Iraq veterans display symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, according to a 2008 study by the RAND Corporation, a nonprofit think tank.

The Soldiers Project has chapters in several cities, including a Chicago chapter begun in 2007 by Kate Schechter, a faculty member at the Institute for Clinical Social Work and the **Rush University** Medical College Department of Psychology.

"I realized that my students would be inheriting the problem of dealing with traumatized people their age, their peers, coming into the community," she said. "It was kind of a systemic vision of education for the next generation."

Although about 80 mental health professionals offer their services in the Chicago area, fewer than 20 veterans have enrolled since the program began.

Outreach is difficult, said Schechter, because the volunteers have full caseloads at their private practices. Most veterans learn about the program through word of mouth, she said.

Still, a lack of trust is the biggest barrier, experts said.

"That's the big issue. They don't come. They don't go for help unless they know you and trust you," said Johanna "Hans" Buwalda, a licensed clinical professional counselor who uses her experiences living in the war-torn Philippines to help veterans.

About 1 million troops have served in Iraq and Afghanistan wars, but only 120,500 have sought treatment from Veterans Affairs since 2002, according to an agency spokeswoman.

Retired Army Maj. Sudip Bose, a Chicagoan who served in Iraq as a battalion surgeon, said soldiers have difficulty admitting they need help: "Someone who was a company commander may not want to sit in that waiting room and get help. It's viewed as a sign of weakness, which is unfortunate because it's a normal reaction."

Therapy through the Soldiers Project is provided in an intimate environment and is confidential, which may be key for active-duty soldiers who fear being ostracized by their peers, said Judy Broder, founder of the Soldiers Project in Los Angeles. Appointments can be made within a few days, she said.

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The Soldiers Project also helps veterans get services they are entitled to from the VA, from employment counseling to head-trauma rehabilitation.

But some young veterans can be intimidated by the VA, especially when they see older veterans struggling with the effects of war, said Buwalda.

"It scares them a lot. They're like, 'Oh my God, after 40 years these people are still like this. It's been 40 years. That's going to be me,'" she said.

Meanwhile, the VA has made efforts to increase its mental health clinicians, while growing its capacity to treat veterans with prolonged exposure and cognitive behavior therapy, a spokeswoman said.

With no end in sight to the conflicts in the Middle East, available treatment for PTSD -- which sometimes does not manifest itself for years -- will become even more important, experts say. So will getting veterans to seek and complete therapy.

Tylke has not heard from the veteran she was working with since spring.

"I think it's a very difficult process, and it's probably one of those things where they enter into it, feel a little bit better ... and fluctuate back and forth," she said.

"Unfortunately, (seeking therapy) is just very frustrating for a lot of people, and they don't want to stick with this whole process," said Todd Crevier, an Iraq veteran and communications director for the Iraq War Veterans Organization.

"It really does come down to the responsibility of the soldiers, the veterans and the family members to say, 'I've got an issue with this, and I need to see a counselor and I need to get things off my chest,'" Crevier said.

Looking for help?

The Soldiers Project offers free and confidential mental health services for veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan. To make an appointment with Chicagoland volunteers, visit thesoldiersproject.org.

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