



Ending Stigma For Veterans and Their Families

November is the month we celebrate veterans and express our gratitude for their service and sacrifice. They often face significant mental health challenges when they complete their service or return from deployment. Stigma may prevent them from sharing their struggles and seeking help.

According to the National Institute of Mental Health, nearly one in five U.S. adults lives with a mental illness, which includes members of active military, their families and veterans. More than 1.7 million veterans received treatment in a VA mental health specialty program in 2018. Yet, many other veterans may not seek treatment due to the stigma of mental illness, not wanting to be viewed as weak or a burden to others.

According to Kathy Zunn, director of community integration at Veterans One-Stop Center of WNY, Inc., there are many assumptions of people that have served in the military. Many believe that every veteran has post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and is liable to snap at any time. The truth is that only 11-20% of veterans have this issue and most are able to manage their symptoms.

"As the nation becomes more informed on mental health, there appears to be a shift in the culture surrounding the stigma," Zunn said. "This will hopefully lead to a decrease in barriers to service as people become more open to discussing their own personal journeys."

Military families also experience stigma

Alyssa Vasquez, an employee at Veterans One-Stop, has experience as a veteran and family member. As a veteran, as well as a former military spouse, she believes that family members face two separate issues.

"The first issue is stigma associated with any mental health issue. Second, is their desire to selflessly support their service member or veteran," Vasquez said. "A lot of times, spouses or loved ones may feel like their needs aren't as important or they may even feel the need to hide their struggles, and as a result are not able to seek treatment openly."

What are ways to eliminate stigma for these family members? Providing resources, education and sharing the stories of

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other families with similar experiences can encourage people to seek help. Several organizational members of the Anti-Stigma Coalition work with veterans and military families to provide social opportunities and essential services.

Help for Military Families and Veterans

Zunn says there have been great strides made in collaborative efforts to be sure all of our military families receive the support and assistance they need. The Veterans One-Stop Center is able to assist with case management services and connect clients to many on-site service organizations that include several community partners that provide assistance in the areas of employment, financial counseling, housing services, benefits counseling, education benefits, and legal services.

The PFC Joseph P. Dwyer Peer Support Program allows veterans and family members an opportunity to connect with those that have shared the same experience as them. The goal of the program is to decrease isolation and create a community of support. The Vet Center of Buffalo provides mental health counseling services for Combat Veterans, Military Sexual Trauma (MST) survivors, and their family members. In addition, the Buffalo VA provides a host of services, both clinical and non-clinical for eligible Veterans.

Several other Anti-Stigma Coalition member organizations provide programs for military members and their families. WNYHeroes offers veterans and their families access to health and housing needs, while offering family care services through simple-yet-essential gestures such as delivering food, holiday gifts and school supplies to veterans' children. Without a strong support system, many veterans and their families are at high risk for emotional, physical and social hardship, often resulting in issues like substance abuse, homelessness, chronic unemployment and familial breakdown.

When Community Veterans Engagement Board joined the Coalition, Patrick W. Welch said. "The stigma associated with seeking help can be detrimental to one's military career and has further negative implications when moving to veteran's status," Welch said. "One of the critical missions of the CVEB is to proactively work on breaking down the stigma associated with mental illness that our society does not understand."

The Community Veterans Engagement Board (CVEB) enables veterans, service members, military families, veteran advocates, community service providers, and stakeholders to have a collective voice in identifying their community goals and work to resolve gaps in service at the local level to improve service delivery for veterans, military families, caregivers, and survivors. ■

COMMON MENTAL HEALTH CONCERNS

According to NAMI, there are three primary mental health concerns that individuals may encounter serving in the military.

- Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). The rate of PTSD may be up to 15 times higher in active duty service members compared to civilians.
- Depression. Five times higher in active duty service members compared to civilians.
- Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI). Symptoms can include headaches, fatigue or drowsiness, memory problems and mood changes and mood swings.

A Q&A with Deaf Access Services

Coalition member Deaf Access Services is an organization helping meet the needs of deaf and hard of hearing people. We recently spoke with **Pamela Kefi, Executive Director**, to learn about the agency's mission and why they are working to eliminate stigma.

Why is your agency involved in reducing the stigma of mental illness?

Because of language barriers to mainstream services, many Deaf and Hard of Hearing people do not have adequate access to health related information or culturally and linguistically appropriate preventive services or interventions. As a result, there are more misconceptions and myths about mental illness, and more people are going without help. We are the only non-profit in WNY solely dedicated to meeting the needs of Deaf and Hard of Hearing people. It is our responsibility to step up and make a difference.

How are individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing at risk for mental health issues?

Deaf and Hard of Hearing individuals are more likely to face longer term issues if they are dealing with mental health challenges because of the lack of language appropriate

service providers. They may be denied interpreters, or not referred to appropriate levels of care because of the providers concern about higher costs or the inability to properly diagnose due to language barriers.

Why is it important to address the stigma of mental illness in our community?

Language rights are human rights and access to mainstream services are values that we all hold true. It's imperative that we act as a community to ensure that all people have equitable access to quality services and essential information in order to live full and independent lives. In the case of access for Deaf people, the stigma and misinformation that exists within the community is certainly a factor we must contend with, but the stigma in the mainstream community about Deaf people, is an even greater barrier to addressing mental health. ■



WELCOME TO OUR NEWEST MEMBERS



Visit letstalkstigma.org/current-members for more information on our current members



Visit our events page at
LETSTALKSTIGMA.ORG/EVENTS
For a list of local mental Health Events in your community



Veterans and Mental Health by Max Donatelli

Veterans Day is celebrated this year on November 11th.

This is a day to recognize and thank the veterans that have served our country. As a USAF veteran myself, that served in Vietnam during a very tumultuous time in our nation's history, it is especially meaningful to me but one with many mixed feelings even after these many years. At 18 years of age, I was at a crossroads in my life. As the war in Vietnam dragged on, we faced a draft that was forcing young men to participate in a war that was unpopular and growing more so every day. I didn't believe we should be there as did most of my friends. However, my dad, Max Sr. was a WWII US Navy veteran that survived kamikaze attacks on his aircraft carrier, the USS Bunker Hill. My mom's dad, was a career chief petty officer in the US Navy. My great great grandfather was an Army colonel in the Civil War. So despite my mixed feelings about the war in Vietnam, I decided to enlist in the USAF. It was a very difficult decision since more people every day were saying we shouldn't be there and college protests became more intense and frequent, and putting my life on the line was a scary decision.

As it turned out, those in uniform became the scapegoats of this unpopular war. What a time to be in the military!

Where other veterans were celebrated and recognized for their service, we were disparaged and called "baby killers" by many and blamed for our association with the US administration decisions. Despite the fact that so many gave their lives for our county and others sacrificed much, we were labeled and stereotyped. Many of us were conflicted about our presence in the war but felt it our duty to serve. It was no wonder that when we came back to unwelcoming and even hostile communities we experienced emotional issues and stigma. I was fortunate to come back to a loving and grateful family. Others were not so blessed.

After serving four years, I enrolled at Canisius College and was asked to start the first veterans' office, as a work study job, while I worked toward my BA degree. I was able to hear from veterans first hand the struggles many of them had adjusting to civilian life. Many did not even want to be identified as a veteran or even consider pursuing additional benefits or help from the Veterans Administration. Many just wanted to keep a low profile and to be left alone. It is no wonder that so many of us did not seek the help that was available at the time.

Today we have a voluntary military, however, that does not mean that the adjustment to civilian life is any easier for

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those particularly coming back from war zones. The stigma of having to get help for a possible mental illness is pervasive in our society in general, but probably more so with those in the military. In the military, we were expected to be strong mentally and physically as well as resourceful. Admitting to what could be perceived as weakness was to be avoided at all costs. So it is particularly difficult for those coming out of the military to seek help for emotional support. This stigma is a real barrier and we want those that need help know that it is not a sign of weakness, but getting the right supports can lead to a more successful and satisfying life.

Finally, recently I was asked to serve on the Community Veterans Engagement Board (CVEB) of WNY that connects local organizations serving veterans. See Facebook for resources and information to get help for veterans and their families (www.facebook.com/cVebWNY/).

Stay tuned as this central hub for CVEB re veteran services in WNY is only in the development stages. Committees are forming now to address major issues facing our veterans. We want all veterans to feel welcomed home and appreciated for their service to our country. ■

Respectfully,

Max Donatelli

Membership Chair and Sargent USAF 1968-1972



BECOME A MEMBER OF THE ERIE COUNTY ANTI-STIGMA COALITION

Does your organization, church, temple, or community group want to combine forces with our organization? Do you individually want to engage with us to stop the stigma of mental illness? Please consider becoming a member of our Coalition by completing our membership form at letstalkstigma.org/support/pledge.

It is going to take a massive community effort to move the needle on stigma, please become a part of the solution. Questions? Please contact Karl Shallowhorn, Chairperson, at kshallowhorn@chcb.net.

We need your help!

Our goal is to get 3,500 pledge takers by the end of the month. You can help by asking others to take the pledge to stop stigma around mental illness.

SHARE THE PLEDGE TO HELP SPREAD THE WORD:
letstalksigma.org/support/pledge

ERIE COUNTY
ANTI-STIGMA
COALITION

Erie County Anti-Stigma Coalition Founding Members:

BryLin Behavioral Health System • Children's Mental Health Coalition of Western New York, Inc.
Community Partners of Western New York • Compeer • Crisis Services of Erie County
Erie County Department of Mental Health • Erie County Office for People with Disabilities
Fellows Action Network • Fuerst Consulting Corporation • Jewish Family Service of Buffalo & Erie County
The Mental Health Advocates of WNY • Millennium Collaborative Care • Patrick P. Lee Foundation
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