



Stigma Strikes Veterans Across Generations

The statistics are alarming:

Between 11 and 20% of Veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan have post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) or depression. The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) estimates that 30% of Vietnam veterans will experience PTSD in their lifetime.

According to U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, in New York, there has been a recent concerning trend of increased reports of poor mental health. In fact, 2019 was the first year when the rate of self-reported poor mental health was higher for Veterans than non-Veterans.

In 2019, 156 Veterans died by suicide in New York. From 2015-2018, more than 3% of Veterans in New York thought

about suicide in the past 12 months. This was a similar percentage as for the general population. However, Veterans in New York die by suicide at a much higher rate than the general State population (nearly twice as high in 2019).

Stigma impacts many Veterans and results from a military culture that expects those who serve to always be tough and strong.

On November 11 – Veterans' Day – The Anti-Stigma Coalition presented a Facebook Live titled *The State of Stigma: How Trauma & Stigma Affect Veterans Across Generations*.

Visit letstalkstigma.org/facebook-live to view past discussions.

A panel of experts discussed differences and similarities between Vietnam, Iraq, Desert Storm, and Afghanistan war experiences, improvements in mental health services, and

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how to support Veterans in the community. Questions were welcome during the event.

Participants included: Max Donatelli, Vietnam Veteran & Community Advocate

- Dr. Paul Harrigan, Iraq Veteran & Psychologist, U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
- Delcey Pulvino, Desert Storm-Era Veteran, Readjustment Counselor, Veteran Center
- Alyssa Vasquez, Iraq Veteran & Director of Community Integration, Veterans One-stop Center of WNY

“Stigma of mental illness is common, because members of the military were not allowed to show any signs of weakness,” said Donatelli, “Counseling was not something that was offered or discussed.”

Donatelli enlisted in the U.S. Air Force after high school, served as an aircraft mechanic, and did a tour in Vietnam from 1971-1972.

He and other Veterans returned home to a nationwide anti-Vietnam War sentiment with high profile protests, and blame placed on returning Veterans for the ongoing war.

“Adding to the burden was the sense of shame that many of us felt about Vietnam,” Donatelli said. “I was fortunate to have loving family and friends to support me, but I certainly witnessed the hostility directed at those who served.”

Society has changed and is more welcoming and appreciative of individuals who serve.

Assisting in this effort was the activism of Vietnam Veterans who improved services and awareness for Veterans who followed them.

According to Donatelli, mental health services have improved for Veterans and active-duty military, especially peer support programs which bring Veterans together to share experiences.

Vet Centers across the country, including one in Buffalo, offer Vets with shared experience the opportunity to learn from each other and find support.

“Just starting the conversation with someone who understands what you’ve been through is the best way to get the help you need to live a healthy life,” he said. “It’s also important to remember that military families often require mental health support.”

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THERE ARE THREE PRIMARY MENTAL HEALTH CONCERNS THAT VETERANS & ACTIVE-DUTY PERSONNEL MAY EXPERIENCE.

- **Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).** Traumatic events, such as military combat, assault, disasters or sexual assault can have long-lasting negative effects such as trouble sleeping, anger, nightmares, being jumpy and alcohol and drug abuse.
- **Depression.** More than just experiencing sadness, depression doesn’t mean you are weak, nor is it something that you can simply “just get over.” Depression interferes with daily life and normal functioning and may require treatment.
- **Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI).** A traumatic brain injury is usually the result of significant blow to the head or body. Symptoms can include headaches, fatigue or drowsiness, memory problems and mood changes and mood swings.

NAMI

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
Preventionfocus, Inc. • Telesco Creative Group • The Peter and Elizabeth C. Tower Foundation

Buffalo's VA has a variety of mental health resources, information, treatment options, and more—all accessible to Veterans, Veterans' supporters, and the public.

Veterans One-stop of WNY offers numerous opportunities for Veterans including the PFC Joseph P. Dwyer Peer Support Program. This program brings United States Armed Forces Veterans, service members and their families together through veteran-to-veteran collaborative services, social activities, and community service, easing the transition from military to civilian life.

Operation COM (Children of the Military) is a free program of Mental Health Advocates of WNY offered in partnership with the Veterans One-stop Center. Children are connected to one another in a safe space using creative arts, fun activities, and family centered events. (Contact Mary at mcparlane@mhawny.org).

The Buffalo Veterans Treatment Court was established in January 2008 and was the first in the nation. It diverts eligible veteran-defendants with substance dependency and/or mental illness, who are charged with felony or misdemeanor non-violent criminal offense, to a specialized criminal court docket.

Resources are available through the *Community Veterans Engagement Board of WNY*, including program providers, businesses, music/arts non-profits, support groups, and more.

WNYHeroes provides Veterans, members of the armed services, and the widows and children of deceased veterans with access to essential services, financial assistance and resources that support their lives and sustain their dignity. ■

Upcoming Events

NOVEMBER 11

Facebook Live:
How Trauma & Stigma Affect
Veterans Across Generations
Erie County Anti-Stigma Coalition

NOVEMBER 15

Cultural Awareness and Diversity
Presented by Horizon Health

NOVEMBER 20

International Survivors
of Suicide Loss Day
American Foundation for Suicide Prevention

DECEMBER 2

Cannabis and Mental Health
Presented by Horizon Health

More Events & Information:
Visit letstalkstigma.org/events

WELCOME TO OUR NEWEST MEMBERS



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

A Q&A with Spectrum Health and Human Services

MEMBER SPOTLIGHT



We recently spoke with **Bob Cannata, Sr. Vice President of Business Development and Community Crisis Services, at Spectrum Health.**

Why did your organization become a member of The Anti-Stigma Coalition?

Spectrum Health is the premier provider of behavioral health services in the Western New York area since 1973. We began servicing people with mental illness at a time when the de-institutionalization was occurring in New York State. Many viewed mental illness from what they saw portrayed in the newspapers and television—and were shaped by the stories of only the most severe cases of mental illness. We recognized the need for individuals living with mental health challenges to be treated with compassion and dignity, and above all, that people are much more than their “diagnosis.” We partnered with many agencies over the years with similar visions and approaches to working with people living with mental health challenges and recognized the value of joining with others dedicated to helping people get the most satisfaction out of their lives. That’s why Spectrum Health joined the Coalition: to be in a collective of like-minded organizations that share our mission and values.

How are people with mental health challenges impacted by stigma?

People unfamiliar with the many aspects of living with a mental health challenge often are wary of and intolerant of persons with mental health challenges. Many are looked down upon in many aspects of their lives, including their relationships with others. There remains a pervasive “...you’re just not trying hard enough!” or people are viewed as “weak” and incapable. Nothing could be further from the truth! So many people have shared their strength and success in their recovery stories!

What impact is the Campaign having in the community?

It’s been exciting to see so many people participate in sending the anti-stigma message—which is really sending the message that people living with mental health challenges are seeking and achieving mental wellness just like everyone else! The campaign seeks to get others to be vocal about this and promotes “conversations” that decrease the misinformation that leads to discrimination. The campaign is also a wonderful way for those not currently living with mental health challenges to support others who are! ■



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.