For many, fear of judgement is a huge barrier for someone that is seeking mental health services. Knowing that you’re walking alongside someone who does not judge you, and who has successfully navigated a similar path, can make all the difference.

ALYSSA VASQUEZ
VETERANS ONE-STOP OF WNY
Stigma can be a significant barrier for Veterans needing and wanting help for mental health challenges. An estimated 50 percent of returning Veterans in need do not seek mental health treatment.

Common mental health concerns for veterans are post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, and traumatic brain injury (TBI). According to the US Department of Veterans Affairs, other issues may include stress, mood, anxiety, sleep, psychotic, and addictive disorders. The 2021 National Veteran Suicide Prevention Annual Report states that approximately 17 Veterans died by suicide every day in 2019.

What are the barriers for Veterans and their families seeking help? The Erie County Anti-Stigma Coalition presents a Facebook Live on Wednesday, November 16 from noon-1 p.m. to discuss Veterans mental health, stigma, and peer support.

Panelists include Dan Arnold, program manager for Peer Support and Dwyer Programs, Veterans One-Stop; Dan Mitchell, program manager, SSG Fox Suicide Prevention Grant Program, Veterans One-Stop; and Mike Shurmatz, LMSW, Social Worker, Buffalo Vet Center.

According to Alyssa Vasquez, director of marketing & development, Veterans One-Stop Center of WNY, many Veterans are far more comfortable helping others than they are asking for, or accepting, help. Family members can also have the added stress of feeling like their needs must take a backseat to those of their Veteran family members—even though that is not the case.

“When you’ve been that protector, and have been the one to lead others, or keep others safe from harm, it can be difficult to admit that YOU may need someone to protect, lead, or help you,” said Vasquez.

Max Donatelli, retired human services executive and family advocate, served in the USAF from 1968 to 1972 and served in Vietnam in 1970 and 1971. He said that returning to the community from serving the US Military can be challenging for most Veterans.

“Returning to the community from serving the US Military can be challenging for most of us Veterans. While varied supports are available from Veteran-serving organizations including the Veterans Administration, often times those that need help with their mental health, choose not to seek help because of the stigma,” Donatelli said. “Being used to being resourceful and resilient, asking for help can be seen as a sign of weakness.”

Donatelli says that family and friends can support those that may need help with this transition if they see the Veteran struggling, or abusing alcohol and/or drugs, or other harmful behaviors, by offering to help him or her look at the vast resources that are available in our community and then encourage getting help.

Many Veterans never got the thanks, recognition, or welcome they deserved.

“As a Vietnam Veteran, let me extend a ‘Welcome Home’ to all the Veterans reading this,” Donatelli said.
Everyone needs someone to lean on at certain points in their lives and our Veterans are no exception.

**MAX DONATELLI**
**VETERAN AND FAMILY ADVOCATE**

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**Mental Health Advocates of WNY, Operation COM**
Operation COM is designed to help all military families cope with the stresses of deployment through creative expression, play, and various supportive programming.

716-886-1242
mhawny.org/program/operation-com-children-of-the-military/

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**Veteran Crisis Line**
Connecting Veterans in crisis and their families and friends with qualified, caring VA responders through a confidential toll-free hotline, online chat, or text.

Dial 988 and Press 1, 24/7 or Text to 838255
veteranscrisisline.net

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**Veterans One-Stop Center of WNY**
Offering a wide holistic range of social and health services needed to complete the transition from military to civilian life.

716-898-0110 | vocwny.org

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**WNY Heroes**
WNY Heroes, Inc. has become a critical life sustaining vehicle for veterans and their families by providing immediate financial assistance to those in need.

716-630-5020 | wnyheroes.org

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**Erie County—Veterans Services Agency**
Participating in outreach events, various community events, serves on committees and visits veterans’ organizations and posts.

716-858-6363 | erie.gov/veterans/

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**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/membership.
Why did your organization become a member of The Anti-Stigma Coalition?

The BPS Adult Education Division’s programs and services are provided to adult learners who are in need of academic credentials and/or training that will better equip them to be self-sufficient and accountable members of our community. Many of these learners face challenges to accomplishing their goals. Among those challenges are mental health issues that could deter them if not addressed. Our instructional/advisory staff is well-trained in finding local resources to assist individual student needs.

How are people with mental health challenges impacted by stigma?

Upon enrollment in any of our programs, students meet one-on-one with an advisor to complete a comprehensive intake form. Many students reveal that they have tried numerous times to return to school but were prevented by their own fears and self-doubts. Building student self-esteem and addressing other mental health issues are critical components of success.

How does your company support mental wellness?

The BPS Adult Education Division has a full-time school psychologist who is based at our youth program site but is available to all students upon request. In addition, Advisors meet individually with students on a regular basis to ensure that they are coming to class and that they are aware of a wide array of health services available to them throughout the Western New York community.