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Veterans Day Highlights Need for Military Mental Health Care

ARLINGTON, Va. – Veterans Day gives Americans the opportunity to celebrate the bravery and sacrifice of all U.S. veterans. This year, the month of November has been named Warrior Care Month by the U.S. Department of Defense. The American Psychiatric Association (APA) is raising awareness for the need for continued mental health services for all military service members and their families. Returning service members face rising mental health issues, such as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), traumatic brain injury and depression.

The APA joined other mental health organizations today in recognizing Give an Hour, a national grassroots network that provides free mental health services to military members and their families. “Not all wounds are physical. There are those hidden injuries that impact the mental health of soldiers, their friends, families and dear ones,” said Carolyn Robinowitz, M.D., APA past president at the press event. “All wounds need attention, and a soldier’s mental health wounds are no different. The combat experience presents a multitude of challenges to service members—challenges that persist and affect those with whom they interact.”

Robinowitz, who has joined the network, noted the importance of giving her time to those who have served their country. “I joined the Give-an-Hour network to make a difference. From both a personal and professional perspective, I recognize the importance of providing confidential, compassionate and free mental health care that is easily available locally for military service members and their families.”

In fact, the American Psychiatric Association has made a strong commitment to advocate on behalf of military members and their families to ensure funding for needed mental health services, improved access to these services, and programs that help reduce the stigma of seeking treatment. As one piece of that effort, the American Psychiatric Association has compiled a number of resources on issues such as PTSD and depression as well as links to helpful information on www.healthyminds.org.

Many studies have demonstrated the significant incidence of mental health problems affecting the military serving in Iraq and Afghanistan: depression, anxiety, substance use disorders. The enormity of the problem was demonstrated in a recent study by the RAND Corporation for example, in which roughly one third of military members returning home from a combat zone was found to suffer from mental health problems. Specifically, finding showed nearly 300,000 U.S. troops are suffering from major depression or Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, and another 320,000 have experienced traumatic brain injuries.

Only about half of those suffering from mental illness have sought treatment.

Family members too experience stress and anxiety related to deployment. In a study conducted by the American Psychiatric Association, nearly half of spouses surveyed reported difficulty sleeping, and more than a third reported both experiencing anxiety and feeling depressed at least twice a week. In addition parental stress and emotional distress negatively impacts children's behavior and school performance.

Additionally, both military members and their spouses reported low levels of knowledge of the warning signs of, and effective treatment options for, mental health issues that may result from having served in support of a war zone. Slightly more than half felt uninformed and about one quarter reported they know *nothing at all* about effective treatment options.

Another challenge faced by the military community is stigma. The same APA survey, two thirds of military members reported that they believe seeking help for mental health concerns would have at least some negative impact on their career. Twenty-eight percent felt it would have a moderate or a great deal of negative impact.

Robinowitz noted that mental health professionals need to do a better job of getting information on mental health issues to these individuals.

“These military servicemen and women have put their lives on the line to serve their country; we as mental health professionals can easily give one hour each week to help meet their needs,” concluded Robinowitz. “I am encouraging all licensed mental health professionals to join this network and give an hour.”

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The American Psychiatric Association is a national medical specialty society whose more than 38,000 physician members specialize in diagnosis, treatment, prevention and research of mental illnesses including substance use disorders. Visit the APA at www.psych.org and www.HealthyMinds.org.