Addressing Barriers to Care for Ohio’s Service Members, Veterans, and Families

Nearly one in five U.S. adults live with a mental health condition. However, the prevalence of trauma and mental illness is disproportionately high among military service members and veterans. According to the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI), about one in five veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan has post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) or depression. Additionally, the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) estimates that 30% of Vietnam veterans will experience PTSD in their lifetime. Each day, an average of 20 veterans die by suicide.

Ensuring Ohio’s veterans have timely access to high-quality and culturally appropriate mental health care is fundamental in reducing the high rate of suicide and enhancing quality of life after service.

Unfortunately, many military service members and veterans struggle to access adequate mental health treatment and experience barriers to care not commonly found in the civilian population. In fact, only about half of the veterans who need mental health treatment actually receive it. According to the National Council on Disability, barriers to treatment fall into two general categories: stigma and access.

Stigma
Military culture promotes inner strength, self-reliance, and the ability to shake off injury, contributing heavily to stigma surrounding mental health issues. There are three unique types of stigma which pose barriers to treatment:

- **Public Stigma** refers to the public (mis)perceptions of individuals with mental illnesses and substance use disorders. Service members or veterans with mental health and/or addiction concerns may worry that they will be perceived as weak, treated differently, or blamed for their problem if they seek help.

- **Self Stigma** refers to the individual internalizing the public stigma and feeling weak, ashamed, and embarrassed.

- **Structural Stigma** refers to the institutional policies or practices that unnecessarily restrict opportunities because of psychological health. Service members repeatedly report believing that their military careers will suffer if they seek psychological services. They believe that seeking care will lower the confidence of others in their ability, threaten career advancement and security clearances, and possibly cause them to be removed from their unit.

Access
When service members or veterans require care, it is important that they are able to find the right provider at the right time. Some of the identified barriers to accessing care include:

- Perceived stigma and concerns with impact on job or reserve unit status;
- Lack of information about what services are available;
- Timely access to care;
- Distance from required specialized services, especially in rural areas;
- Availability of specified types of service, including early intervention services;
- Bureaucratic obstacles to accessing care;
- User friendliness;
- Clinic hours and policies;
- Financial difficulties; and
- Lack of non-VA providers with specialized training around treating the unique needs of service members, veterans, and families.
The Importance of Community Collaboration

Increased collaboration across community systems is essential in combatting stigma and improving access to mental health and addiction services for Ohio’s veterans, service members, and families. While there are organizations specifically designed for veterans, it is important to acknowledge that effective outreach requires the inclusion of programs across many different sectors. As veterans are integrated members of their communities, many institutions, agencies, and organizations play a role in promoting the importance of mental health wellness.

The National Strategy for Preventing Veteran Suicide emphasizes the importance of strengthening community partnerships to improve access to mental health services for veterans and families. According to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, only one-third of our nation’s veterans receive services through the VA. This number points to the fact that many of our service members and families receive care directly within their communities. It is therefore imperative that local systems, organizations, and agencies invest in education around military culture in an effort to promote help-seeking behaviors and to increase the availability of culturally competent care for the veteran community.

Many national, state, and local organizations can play a part in helping eliminate stigma and improve access to care for service members, veterans, and their families. Examples include: Veteran and Military Service Organizations; federal, state, and local government entities; community service coordinators; faith-based organizations; businesses; suicide prevention coalitions; law enforcement and criminal justice agencies; legal support service providers; community providers; educational systems; and media organizations.

Resources for Service Members, Veterans, and Families

From anxiety, to depression, to post-traumatic stress, there are a wide range of conditions that can affect mental health. Fortunately, there are resources to help. The programs below offer behavioral health care information for those who have served and continue to serve, as well as their families, providers, community members, agency partners, and others who want to support the health and wellness of service members.

- Star Behavioral Health Providers (SBHP) is a resource for veterans, service members, and their families to locate behavioral health professionals with specialized training in understanding and treating military service members and their families.

- The Veterans Crisis Line connects veterans in crisis and their families and friends with qualified, caring Department of Veterans Affairs responders through a confidential toll-free hotline, online chat, or text. Veterans and their loved ones can call 1-800-273-8255 and Press 1, chat online, or send a text message to 838255 to receive confidential support 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year. Support for deaf and hard of hearing individuals is available.

- Ohio Cares is a collaboration of state and local agencies supporting the behavioral health of returning Operation Iraqi Freedom/Operation Enduring Freedom veterans and their families.

- MakeTheConnection.net connects Veterans, their family members and friends and other advocates with mental health information, local resources, and inspiring stories of recovery. Visitors can find reliable information on how to cope with challenges such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), traumatic brain injury, military sexual trauma, and transitioning from service.

- VA Vet Center Program (readjustment counseling).

- Operation: Military Kids.

For additional resources, please visit the Ohio Department of Veterans Services (www.dvs.ohio.gov) and the Ohio Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services (www.mha.ohio.gov).

Sources: SAMHSA U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs Ohio Department of Veterans Services
American Public Health Association National Alliance on Mental Illness OhioMHAS
National Council on Disability

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