



The Needs of New York State's Returning Veterans and Their Families

BACKGROUND

In exploring the needs of New Yorkers who cope with both mental health and substance use disorders at the same time, the New York State Health Foundation (NYSHealth) identified returning Iraq and Afghanistan war veterans and their families as a unique population whose needs are not being met. To learn more, NYSHealth commissioned an assessment by the RAND Corporation that examined both the needs of returning veterans and their families and the resources currently available to support them.¹ This issue brief highlights some of the key data points included in the report and explores the implications of these findings for New York State.

SUMMARY OF VETERANS' NEEDS

Since October 2001, approximately 2 million U.S. troops have been deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan, and an estimated 85,000 of the troops have returned to New York.

It is not surprising that veterans have unique unmet needs, specifically for mental health services. The RAND Corporation's assessment helps to quantify those needs and paint a clearer picture of the gaps in resources and services.

The clearest needs among returning veterans are for mental health services. Nearly a quarter of veterans (22%) in New York State were found

¹ The full report is available at www.nyshealth.org and www.rand.org/pubs/technical_reports/TR920.html

BY THE NUMBERS:

MENTAL HEALTH NEEDS OF RETURNING VETERANS

22% of returning veterans have a probable diagnosis of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and/or major depression.

8 times higher risk of probable PTSD for veterans, compared to similar individuals in the general population.

2-to-4 times higher risk of major depression for veterans, compared to similar individuals in the general population.

34% of veterans self-indicated a mental health need (i.e., they wanted but did not receive mental health services at some point during the past year; reported that counseling from a civilian therapist would be helpful; or reported that drug or alcohol treatment would be helpful).

1/3 of veterans with a probable diagnosis or a self-indicated need sought mental health treatment.

Half of all veterans seeking mental health treatment did not receive even minimally adequate care.

RESOURCE NEEDS OF RETURNING VETERANS

46% of veterans with a mental health need would prefer to receive mental health services outside of the VA system. A similar percentage of all veterans would prefer to receive care outside of the VA system.

42% say they don't have a good understanding of their benefits.

26% say they don't know how to get their questions about benefits answered.

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to have a probable diagnosis of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and/or major depression. Compared to similar individuals in the general population, the veterans studied were at an eight-fold greater risk of probable PTSD and a two- to four-fold greater risk of major depression.

Veterans with mental health needs (both those who have a probable diagnosis of PTSD or major depression and those who identified themselves as being in need of mental health services) are not necessarily getting the right care. Of all veterans who did seek mental health treatment, only half received a minimally adequate standard of care. Others are not getting care at all: only one-third of veterans with a mental health need actually sought treatment.

In the study, veterans cited multiple barriers to seeking mental health services, including concerns about the side effects of medications and the persistent stigma surrounding mental health issues. However, many veterans also said that they had difficulty understanding the benefits and services available to them, and knowing where to turn to ask questions, suggesting a need for better outreach and coordination of services.

There must also be better coordination between the VA and community-based health and social service organizations. Nearly half of veterans surveyed indicated that they would prefer to receive care outside of the VA system. One factor which may contribute to the desire to receive community-based care is that 41% of New York veterans are Reserve or National Guard members. Those servicemembers will primarily return home not to a military base but to neighborhoods and jobs outside of the military. Veterans, like all Americans, want to have choices about where they receive their care, and the system of care and services must support those choices.

Military families, too, need support in their communities. In addition to examining veterans' needs, the study included surveys of the spouses of returning veterans. Although spouses' reported rates of depression, substance use, and unemployment were similar to the general population, 44% reported having problems dealing with their veteran spouse's mood changes, and 42% worried about possible future deployments.

IMPLICATIONS FOR NEW YORK STATE

Given what we know about veterans' needs and preferences, New York State has an opportunity to improve the lives of veterans and their families. Now is the time for local and national government agencies, community-based health and social services organizations, and others to develop a statewide strategy to address barriers to care and services both within and outside of the VA and to fill the gaps in needed resources.

BY THE NUMBERS:

BARRIERS TO SEEKING MENTAL HEALTH TREATMENT

38% are concerned about side effects of medication.

33% are concerned that seeking help could harm their career.

32% are concerned that they would be denied a security clearance.

26% are concerned about losing coworkers' confidence.

21% are concerned about losing their supervisor's respect.

The Needs of New York State's Returning Veterans and Their Families *(continued)*

Some broad priority areas for improvement include:

- 1. The VA must make it a priority to expand how it works together with community-based health and social service organizations to ensure that veterans' needs are being met.**
There is a critical need to improve quality both in the VA and in other health and social service systems. An important aspect of this work will be training both VA and civilian providers on the culture and needs of veterans.
- 2. Extremely complicated health care systems serving veterans must be simplified.**
Veterans often feel confused about the array of benefits and services available to them and say they are not sure where to go with questions about available resources. Interventions to address this challenge include providing navigation assistance; improving outreach to connect veterans with care coordinators; and increasing peer-led programs to help veterans navigate the health system and provide immediate support to returning veterans.
- 3. Addressing the mental health needs of veterans will require a multi-pronged approach.**
Improving the quality of care and services is essential, but not sufficient to meet veterans' needs. Priorities for ensuring that all veterans receive the care they need will require educating veterans about available treatment and services, reducing the stigma of treatment, and improving adherence to treatment.

The New York State Health Foundation has convened a Stakeholder Advisory Panel to respond to these core areas for improvement. The group—which includes government leaders, VA representatives, veteran-serving organizations, mental health and substance use counselors, health care providers, and Iraq and Afghanistan veterans and their families—will inform an action plan to ensure that New York State is able to better meet the needs of veterans and their families.

New York State's returning veterans and their families deserve timely access to high-quality care and services that meet their needs and preferences. Delivering on that promise will require a collaborative effort across sectors to address the gaps in information and services for veterans and to improve existing systems of care.

About the New York State Health Foundation

The New York State Health Foundation is a private Foundation dedicated to improving the health of all New Yorkers. The Foundation has a three-part mission: expanding health insurance coverage, increasing access to high-quality health care services, and improving public and community health by educating New Yorkers about health issues and empowering communities to address them.



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