

Caring for veterans' mental health

By Alexa James

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Bush was kidding the standing-room-only crowd at an annual conference of the Institute for Disaster Mental Health at SUNY New Paltz.

But his point was a serious one: America’s veterans are going to need a lot of therapy for a very long time. Not all, Bush said, will battle post traumatic stress disorder, but nearly every one will struggle to readjust in the civilian world.

The crowd at yesterday’s conference included mental health professionals, members of the clergy, military spouses and cadets from the U.S. Military Academy.

All bracing for what could become either a shining or shameful moment in military history.

Dr. James Halpern, the institute’s director, prefers the more positive spin. “We wouldn’t have had a conference like this 20 to 30 years ago,” he said. This time, “We couldn’t handle the number of people interested.”

The stigmas that dogged veterans after Vietnam are slowly dissolving, Halpern said, but communities need to aggressively keep the military’s mental health on the front burner.

"The bad news is, soldiers are not sticking well with treatment," said Dr. Patricia Resick, director of the Women's Health Sciences Division of the National Center for PTSD in Boston. "They want to get back to their lives."

"As communities, we have to work at destigmatizing treatment. It's just like going to the doctor's office," she said. "It is a treatable disorder."

And one the mental health community is bracing for.

An estimated 1.6 million Americans have served in Iraq and Afghanistan, according to the state's VA Health Care Network. Of those, 70,000 have deployed three times and 20,000 have served at least five tours.

With each deployment, family and friends are left behind.

Yesterday's conference included workshops geared toward homecomings, "family reintegration" and "stress through deployment cycles."

Cami Findley attended as a case manager with the Crystal Run Village Mental Health Services Supported Housing Program in Middletown.

As her colleagues took notes, she found herself nodding in agreement, the keynote topics all too familiar.

Findley's husband is a Marine, based at the Stewart military base in Newburgh. Last time he returned from a deployment, "my four-month-old was scared to death of him," and next time he takes off for training, she'll endure several weeks of "Daddy?" calls from her 2-year-old.

"These people are in our communities ... They are our comrades," said Kai Chitaphong, of the Veterans Integrated Services Network in Canandaigua. Folks need to prepare proactively, he said, for years of need to come.

"We are on the front end of this thing," he said. "Let's go beyond the yellow ribbon."



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