



NATIONAL COALITION *for* HOMELESS VETERANS

“The Emerging Needs of Veterans: A Call to Action for the Social Work Profession”

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Quick Takeaways:

- Advances in medical technology and body armor have increased the survival rates of veterans of recent conflicts. Coupled with lengthier deployments and more frequent redeployments, these higher survival rates result in a growing prevalence of psychological disorders among veterans.
- As the needs of veterans continue to expand, social workers play an increasingly essential role in helping veterans navigate the emotions and challenges of readjustment.

Summary:

This literature review summarizes recent research regarding psychological challenges faced by veterans upon reintegration and argues the necessity of social workers to serve as a guide. The editorial explores the causes of psychological disorders among veterans of the most recent wars; the unique challenges of women veterans; and the reasons why social workers are vital to a healthy transition into civilian life.

Findings:

Veterans of recent conflicts suffer from psychological injury at higher rates than those who served in previous wars. This growth can be attributed to a number of factors. Improvements in medical technology and body armor allow many seriously wounded veterans, who would have died in previous wars, to survive. Longer deployments and more frequent redeployments are contributing factors as well. A report released in 2008 found that while 300,000 service members from the Iraq and Afghanistan wars suffer from symptoms of PTSD or major depression, only about half had sought professional help (Jaycox & Tanielian, 2008). Untreated mental illness may lead to unemployment, which precipitates homelessness and suicide. The author argues that expanded treatment will lead to a decline in veteran unemployment, homelessness, and suicide rates.

Female veterans, who account for about 10 percent of Iraq/Afghanistan veterans, pose a unique treatment challenge. As the number of female veterans continues to rise, treatments must adapt to encompass not only the experiences of combat, but also the impacts of military sexual trauma (MST) and the weight of caregiving responsibilities at home. Given the increasing complexity of treatment, the author calls for a concerted effort on the part of the Department of Veterans Affairs to recruit and retain social workers interested in working with veterans.

Conclusion

Social workers play a unique role in helping veterans adjust to civilian life—offering individual counseling services and advocating on the behalf of veterans. Unfortunately, the current demand for social workers far outweighs the supply. Encouraging a stream of new and current social workers to focus on serving veterans specifically will help over time. In the short term, organizations that work with veterans can infuse the philosophy and approach of social workers into their treatment practices, to ensure that veterans receive the best possible care.