

Ease of Access to Care

Overview

Behavioral health care is of great importance to the military community. While refinements in diagnostic and treatment methods have ensured that unprecedented numbers of our veterans and service members are receiving the help they need, many remain reluctant to seek treatment. The issues confounding our ability to provide care are delicate and complex: stigma, for example, remains a significant problem within both the civilian and military realms. The barriers to care are high, and the difficulty of learning about behavioral health care, locating a provider and navigating health insurance or Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) guidelines is significant.

These difficulties extend to all members of the military community. Reservists, National Guardsmen and family members are also impacted by the many barriers to behavioral health care. As communities, we must work to make behavioral health care as easy to access as possible for our citizens in need.

There are three steps to provide ease of access to care: 1) Identify and Evaluate Services Available to the Community; 2) Eliminate Barriers to Behavioral Health Care; and 3) Bring Behavioral Health Care to the Community

Is it being done already? Many behavioral health providers conduct their own outreach within the military community. Contact local providers, hospitals, local chapters of state and national mental health associations, behavioral health support organizations, etc. and inquire as to their outreach methods. Even if they already have outreach strategies, you may be able to provide support and build capacity as a partner. Many communities also host behavioral health awareness events; contact local community managers at the government and nonprofit level and community mental health centers to determine whether or not you are able to assist with such events in any capacity.

Step-By-Step Implementation

Step 1: Identify and Evaluate Services Available to the Community

It is important that you evaluate the behavioral health services available in your community. If you have engaged in any type of community mapping or have convened the community to build a Community Action Team (see [Community Action Planning Tool](#)) you may have familiarized yourself with some of the providers and organizations operating in behavioral health space however an in-depth examination of those services is necessary in order to make informed recommendations to the community. Behavioral health care is a delicate area, and stigma is an ongoing problem within the populace at large and the military community in particular. As a community leader, your advocacy of specific providers, programs and organizations holds significant weight. The organizations and resources listed below are examples of behavioral health care services that may be available to your community. You may find it useful, when assessing available services, to utilize a similar framework. Also, be sure and check out resources like www.211.org and The National Resource Center at Be sure to check out online portals such as www.211.org , or The National Resource Directory at

<https://www.nationalresourcedirectory.gov/> to see if there are services and providers logged in the systems that are in your area.

- **VA programs:** The VA provides extensive support for the behavioral health needs of veterans and qualifying Reservists and National Guardsmen.
 - **Benefits:** VA personnel provide extensive care for those eligible, and the behavioral health experts therein possess an intimate understanding of the issues unique to the military community.
 - **Drawbacks:** VA services are sometimes difficult to navigate, and many veterans are either unaware of their particular level of benefits or are unwilling to engage with the VA system. Many VA hospitals are underfunded and rely on outdated equipment and materials. Substantial waiting lists for treatment are not unusual.
- **Private care: Civilian** providers are capable of treating veterans, service members and their families.
 - **Benefits:** Private care is generally more easily accessible than the alternatives, which allows veterans and service members a greater degree of latitude when selecting their provider. Private care may be more community-oriented than other forms of behavioral health care, which may make patients more comfortable.
 - **Drawbacks:** Civilian providers may lack an understanding of military culture, which can make forming a bond with veterans and service members difficult. Private care may be more expensive than alternative solutions, and difficulty navigating health insurance organizations is not uncommon, particularly in the behavioral health realm. For more information on these issues, as well as some ways to eliminate them, see *Behavioral Health Promising Practice: Provider Training*.
- **Support organizations:** An increasing number of nonprofit organizations are operating in the behavioral health realm.
 - **Benefits:** Support organizations provide a wide array of benefits to those in need, ranging from direct behavioral health care to peer support to financial aid. This specialization allows most organizations to provide extensive support in their area of choice. Support organizations are an excellent supplemental resource for individuals and communities.
 - **Drawbacks:** While there are a large number of support organizations operating on the national level, it may be difficult to find organizations active in your specific community; moreover, their goals, purposes and strategies will vary dramatically depending on the specific organization. Those without a specialized interest in the military community may find it difficult to relate or identify with military culture. Generally speaking, the need for care exceeds the capacity of these organizations to help, which can make it difficult to rely on support organizations as a primary mechanism of care.
- **Online care: Recent** years have seen the development of behavioral health care provided via the Internet.
 - **Benefits:** Online providers are highly convenient, allowing those in need to receive care from the comfort of their own homes. Online care is highly confidential, and presents the lowest barrier to entry of any type of behavioral health treatment.
 - **Drawbacks:** Online behavioral health therapy is a new technology and remains largely untested. Some may be uncomfortable interacting with behavioral health care providers through their computers. Online care is impersonal and may make it difficult to form a strong provider-patient relationship. It can be difficult to assess the

quality of online care programs. Online care may also be expensive, and some health insurance providers may decline to cover it. Patients who utilize online care as their primary or sole form of therapy may lack access to necessary technology, in-patient services, etc.

Volunteer Opportunities

Title: Behavioral Health Liaison

Task: Develop a list of behavioral health programs and services within the community; compile information on the type of care, availability, contact information, accepted health insurance, etc. for each of these services; perform preliminary outreach to behavioral health providers.

Attributes: Enthusiastic, affable, interested in the military community

Who: Volunteers should be well-organized and have experience conducting basic research; members of the military community are encouraged to apply; a background in mental health is desirable, either in the form of an undergraduate degree in a related field or in prior work experience

Hours: Flexible

Step 2: Eliminate Barriers to Behavioral Health Care

Now that you have assessed the forms of behavioral health care available within the community, it is time to eliminate the barriers to that care.

- **Demystify VA care:** Veterans can access the services offered by the VA, but the level of service provided is dependent on a number of factors like discharge status, era serviced, priority level in terms of need and length of time in the military. The process can be difficult to navigate, and many are unaware of the extent of their benefits. Clearly defining the various benefits available to each veteran and promoting awareness of VA services are among the most important tasks of any behavioral health advocate operating in the military community. Coordinate with the services available through VA Hospital Centers and/or Vet Centers in your community to provide information about the care and benefits available.
- **Support groups:** Stigma presents a serious barrier to the treatment of the behavioral health needs of our veterans and service members. In order to ensure that as many at-need members of the community as possible receive adequate care, we must work to eliminate stigma wherever possible. One of the best ways to do so is through the establishment of peer support groups. These groups help individuals understand that they are not alone, and allow veterans and service members to discuss their issues as equals. Vet Centers provide extensive peer support services, but may not be geographically convenient for your community; if access to the local Vet Center is not convenient, and if there are no other established peer support networks in your community, take steps towards creating one. If there are, consider ways to increase participation. For more information on stigma, as well as ways to mitigate its influence in your community, see *Behavioral Health Promising Practice: Anti-Stigma Public Awareness Campaign*.
- **Populate existing community portals with Findings:** Using your findings from *Step 1: Identify and Evaluate Services Available to the Community*, prepare a comprehensive, centralized guide to the behavioral health providers in your area. This information can be compiled and disseminated as a pamphlet but most importantly it should be used to populate the many online resources that already exist. Be sure to populate sites like www.211.org, or The National Resource Directory at

<https://www.nationalresourcedirectory.gov/>. There may be local community portals or websites that your need to populate. You should also check with the providers that are on the list to ensure they have information on their site specific to the veteran and military community. In the portals, be sure to provide a general overview of the type of care, as well as specific data such as contact information, location, availability, accepted health insurance, the size and scale of the practice (if applicable), etc.

Note: It is highly important that you do not duplicate efforts while implementing this promising practice. Always leverage the resources and systems that exist instead of creating another resource directory or website.

Volunteer Opportunities

Title: Website manager

Task: Ensure list of providers and services are posted in online resources like 211 and the National Resource Directory. Note: There may be others local to the community. Provide basic oversight of the portal or website, to include updating contact data, and ensure website and community portal remain up-to-date and accurate

Attributes: Enthusiastic, affable, interested in the military community

Who: Volunteers should be well-organized and have experience conducting basic research; experience with basic web editing tools is requested, but not necessary; members of the military community are encouraged to apply

Hours: Flexible

Step 3: Bring Behavioral Health Care to the Community

While eliminating the barriers to care is a necessary and useful task, it can also be beneficial to pursue more aggressive ways of bringing behavioral health care to the community.

- **Host a behavioral health resource fair:** There is no better way to engage the community than with a behavioral health services and support fair. This type of event allows interested parties to meet providers, learn about behavioral health issues, discuss behavioral health with their peers, and interact with support organizations, the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and Department of Defense (DoD) personnel as well as other significant parties. A behavioral health services and support fair provides an ideal time to distribute any literature you have created, as well as to build personal relationships with community members. Though they may require a significant contribution of resources and planning, fairs are among the best ways to bring behavioral health care and awareness to the community. Local mental health associations may also make excellent partners, as they are often interested in training opportunities for their members.
 - **Venue:** Should you decide to host a behavioral health services and support fair, it is important that you secure a venue early. Local support organizations may be able to provide you with the space needed; failing that, many facilities are willing to donate several hours of use for charitable purposes. Develop a list of small-, medium- and large-scale venues in your area that might be amenable to hosting your event. High schools, universities, hotels and military installations are among the most common. As a last resort, it may be necessary to pay a fee to book a venue; these fees are often significant and should be considered early on in planning process. Be sure to ask whether the facility will provide tables, chairs and other materials.

- **Outreach:** To ensure the success of your services and support fair, be sure to reach out to the local behavioral health community well in advance of your selected date. The presence of support organizations, care providers and other members of the behavioral health realm are among the most valuable aspects of the fair.
- **Speakers:** Reach out to local behavioral health experts and invite them to speak during your services and support fair. These can be local civilian providers, members of support organizations, military or VA personnel, etc. Members of the military community who have themselves struggled with behavioral health also make excellent speakers, and provide a personal touch that is more influential than any litany of facts or statistics.
- **Staffing:** You will need to staff the event with volunteers or employees. They will set up the event, direct providers to their assigned area, provide general support to attendees, answer any questions the participants might have about the facilities and clean up afterward. The size of the venue and the expected attendance of your behavioral health services and support fair will determine how many individuals are needed to ensure success.
- **Management:** You will also need a smaller number of experienced volunteers or employees to serve as event management. They will organize workers, answer any more involved questions that employers or job candidates might have and provide general oversight of the event.

Volunteer Opportunities

Title: Event Manager

Task: Organize chairs, tables, provider/organization placards and other set-up items for the event; direct participants to their assigned area; provide general support to attendees; organize congregating rooms and other areas; answer any questions the participants might have about the facilities; provide clean-up for the facility afterward

Attributes: Affable, enthusiastic, well-organized, interested in the military community

Who: Volunteers should be enthusiastic about behavioral health; no experience required; members of the military community are encouraged to apply

Hours: Flexible

There are many important logistical steps involved in any large event; it is impossible to cover each in detail. While the above hits many of the major tasks you should focus on, be sure to consider each of the following as well. Though smaller, each goes a long way towards ensuring your behavioral health services and support fair is as pleasant and successful as it can be:

- **Organization:** Ensure that there is an internal logic to the structure and set-up of the event. For example, it might be advisable to group similar types of behavioral health care near each other. The unique composition of your fair must be considered when deciding on the best way to organize your floor space, but one idea might be to cluster all private providers in one area, nonprofits and support organizations in another, VA and DoD personnel in yet another, etc.
- **Refreshments:** Providing refreshments generally yields a positive reaction from participants at public events. They are also an inexpensive way for a local business or organization to generate positive PR. As a result, many are willing to provide donations of soda, coffee, pastries, etc. Once your behavioral health services and support fair has generated a high level of interest, consider reaching out to local businesses and organizations. If necessary,

offer special signage at the refreshment table.

- **Survey administration:** Feedback from the participants of the services and support fair can be of immense help in towards future event planning. Develop a survey to be administered towards the end of the event. Keep it brief, simple and to the point: What did you find particularly useful? How can we improve the convention for future attendees? Questions in this vein will provide the most useful results. For more information, see the Surveying Guideline Tool.

Volunteer Opportunities

Title: Resource Fair Recruiter

Task: Contact local businesses, charities, schools and other organizations to solicit materials for the event; compile a list of behavioral health services and organizations valuable to the military community; contact service providers and organizations and discuss their presence at the event

Attributes: Affable, enthusiastic, well-organized, interested in the military community

Who: Volunteers should be enthusiastic about behavioral health, comfortable speaking with people they do not know, and have some basic research experience; members of the military community are encouraged to apply

Hours: Flexible

Measures of Success

It is difficult to accurately measure the “impact” of your efforts or your effectiveness in increasing the community’s ease of access to behavioral health care, and doing so may require an independent evaluation consultant or other external expert as well as significant funding. At the same time, it is important to track data so that you can always keep your eye on the goal, know if you have achieved success, as well as identify what you learned. Even a basic ability to track the outputs of your efforts will help reveal the positive effect your efforts have had in the community as well as help you identify other major gaps. Below are some ideas you may wish to consider:

- **Number of Providers and Services added to Online Portals:** Simply count the number of resources and providers that were added to the online portals. This is information that wasn’t there before and because of your efforts they are more easily identifiable.
- **Number of Providers who Post Targeted Marketing and Outreach on their Websites:** Track the number of service providers who had not previously targeted the military community with information on their sites who now do because of your efforts.
- **Number of Support Groups and Number of Attendees**
Track the number of support groups added in a community and/or the number of attendees to the support groups based on increase in awareness and education.
- **Number of Resource Fair Attendees & Participants**
Track the number of individuals who attend the resource fair as well as the number of service providers who attend to educate others about the resources and services offered in the community.
- **Provider Reviews:** Though online reviews present some credibility issues, you may nevertheless find it useful to establish a process whereby you track the amount of reviews provided by the military community. You can monitor this through sites like The National Resource Directory.

- **Survey Members of Military Community:** Present members of the military community with a survey designed to assess overall awareness and ease of access to local behavioral health programs.

Other Resources

- **Citizen Soldier Support Program (CSSP):** <http://www.citizensoldiersupport.org/>
 - CSSP is a congressionally authorized, federally funded grant administered through the Odum Institute for Research and Social Science at the University of North Carolina – Chapel Hill. To prepare civilian providers to address post-deployment issues facing current conflict veterans and their families, CSSP has partnered with Area Health Education Centers and medical providers from the Department of Veterans Affairs, United States Navy and United States Public Health Service to create on-site and online courses for PTSD and TBI, Women Returning from Combat and Family Issues.
- **Defense Centers of Excellence:** <http://dcoe.health.mil/>
 - DCoE assesses, validates, oversees and facilitates prevention, resilience, identification, treatment, outreach, rehabilitation and reintegration programs for psychological health (PH) and traumatic brain injury (TBI) to ensure the Department of Defense meets the needs of the nation's military communities, warriors and families.
- **Department of Veterans Affairs (VA):** <http://www.va.gov/>
 - The VA was founded in order to fulfill President Abraham Lincoln's promise, "To care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow, and his orphan" by serving and honoring the men and women who are America's veterans. To this end, the VA operates an extensive array of facilities throughout the United States.
- **Give an Hour:** www.giveanhour.org/
 - Give an Hour is a national nonprofit organization that provides free mental health care to our returning troops, as well as our veterans, their families and their communities. Mental health professionals from all major disciplines are included in the network, which includes psychologists, psychiatrists, social workers, substance abuse counselors, licensed professional counselors, pastoral counselors, psychiatric nurses, marriage therapists and family therapists. Give an Hour has providers in every state and U.S. territory. There is no limit on services provided, and all services are free.
- **National Center for PTSD:** <http://www.ptsd.va.gov/>
 - A VA-run center of excellence for research and education on the prevention, understanding and treatment of PTSD. The National Center provides no direct clinical care, working instead to improve the well-being and understanding of American Veterans throughout the country. The site provides extensive information for both providers and veterans.
- **The Pathway Home:** <http://www.thepathwayhome.org/>
 - The Pathway Program is a residential recovery program specifically created for, and dedicated to serve, our nation's "new warriors" – those of any age who have served our nation's global war on terror in areas of the world such as Afghanistan and Iraq. These men and women have survived the stressors of war, but find themselves experiencing problems that are "getting in the way" of functioning at their top form.
- **Real Warriors Campaign:** <http://www.realwarriors.net/>
 - The Real Warriors Campaign is an initiative launched by the DCoE to promote the processes of building resilience, facilitating recovery and supporting reintegration of

returning veterans, service members and their families. The site features a comprehensive section specifically for service members, veterans and families, and provides a wealth of valuable information and material.

- **RESPECT-Mil:** <http://www.pdhealth.mil/respect-mil/index1.asp>
 - A treatment model designed by the United States Department of Defense's Deployment Health Clinical Center (DDHC) to screen, assess and treat active duty soldiers with PTSD and depression. RESPECT-Mil provides information for primary care clinicians and behavioral health experts. The site also engages in web-based provider training and has a number of specialized care guides, tools for implementation, etc.
- **TRICARE:** <http://www.tricare.mil/>
 - TRICARE is the health care program serving uniformed service members, retirees and their families worldwide.