

Reintegration and The Military Community

Service members, whether returning from deployment or permanently separating from the military, come home to a time of celebration with family and friends. However, when the excitement wears off, the reality and challenges of reintegration begin. In 2009, approximately 322,000 service members, supported by 170,000 spouses, were faced with the daunting task of reintegrating into their community following separation from the military. Additionally, about half of those couples were supporting children (Department of Defense, 2009). That year, only 13 percent of veterans strongly agreed that their reintegration was going well, with only 9 percent of veterans strongly agreeing that the needs of their family were being met. Unfortunately, local community groups failed to contact nearly 70 percent of these veterans (Yonkman & Bridgeland, 2009).

Overview of the Issue

Service members coming home after deployment face several stressful challenges during reintegration. A 2007 study shows increasing rates of interpersonal conflict and behavioral health risk in the six months after separation from the military (Milliken, Auchterlonie, & Hoge, 2007).

Another study shows that veterans have “some to extreme” difficulty in:

- Sharing personal thoughts and feelings
- Keeping up with friends and getting along with their families
- Belonging in a civilian society after operating in an alternative culture
- Gaining and retaining a job
- Taking care of their mental and physical health
- Finding meaning in life after witnessing the realities of a war

This study also shows that veterans reported higher rates of anger issues, drinking and drug use, reckless driving, divorce, legal problems and losing touch with their spirituality since coming home. Whether a veteran is facing post-traumatic stress disorder or not does not affect the fact that he or she will face challenges in several aspects of life after separation from service (Sayer et al., 2010).

When reintegration is unsuccessful, the consequences can be dire. The percentage of veterans developing post-traumatic stress is overwhelming. Approximately 18 veterans commit suicide every day (Shinseki, 2010). The suicide rate of veterans ages 20 to 24 is two to four times higher than their civilian counterpart (Yonkman & Bridgeland, 2009). Homelessness also affects veterans at an alarming rate. While only 8 percent of the general population can claim veteran status, nearly 20 percent of the homeless population is veterans (National Coalition for Homeless Veterans, 2011).

A scale created by psychiatrists helps measure one’s stress from social readjustment by quantifying major life events into Life Change Units (LCUs). The more life changing events one experiences in a six-month period, the more LCUs he or she will accrue. The final score is an indicator of one’s increased risk for illness. Some of the common life stressors that separating service members face are listed below. A total score of 300 or more in a six-month timeframe

indicates a great level of stress and an increased risk for stress-related illness (Miller & Rahe, 1997).

Major Life Event	Life Change Units
Change in work type	51
Change in residence	52
Spouse beginning or ending work	46
Beginning or ending school	38
Change in social activities	27
Major decision regarding future	51
Decreased income	60
Total	325

Military Family

Service members are not alone in facing challenges reintegrating into society. A 2008 study of military spouses showed that 83 percent reported feelings of anxiety or depression during their spouse's deployment, and 28 percent reported difficulties readjusting when their spouse returned from deployment. The same study found that 64 percent of military children had increased levels of fear or anxiety, 57 percent had increased behavioral problems at home, and 37 percent had increased behavioral problems at school along with decreased academic performance (Defense Manpower Data Center, 2009).

Existing Services

While many people experience these stresses over their lifetime, reintegrating military members and families often deal with multiple stresses in a brief period of time. Many veterans turn to the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) for assistance reintegrating into civilian life, but the VA is understaffed and overwhelmed with the sheer number of veterans seeking help. In addition, many of the issues veterans face are outside the scope of the VA. (Sayer et al., 2010).

Nationwide, there are hundreds of thousands of existing veteran service organizations helping out in areas such as employment, recreation, housing, counseling and accessing benefits. However, finding and accessing these organizations can be a difficult task for returning military families. Communities need a process in place to help the military community reintegrate successfully by promptly connecting them to the services they need and encouraging personal relationships to grow between the community and reintegrating populations.

How You Can Help

The local community can prevent these and other hardships with a plan for reintegration. The Community Blueprint will serve to organize and mobilize community programs in support of service members, veterans and their families, and provide the framework to assist veterans in reintegration. By organizing welcome home, mentoring and Yellow Ribbon programs, communities can honor those who have sacrificed so much for their country as well as help them successfully reintegrate into civilian life.

Quote

“Our men and women in uniform stand watch abroad and more are readying to deploy. To each and every one of them, and to the families who bear the quiet burden of their absence, Americans are united in sending one message: we honor your service, we are inspired by your sacrifice, and you have our unyielding support. And just as they must have the resources they need in war, we all have a responsibility to support them when they come home.”

- President Barack Obama to a joint session of Congress, Feb. 24, 2009

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