

# Brooklyn Daily Eagle

## Many Returning Veterans Feel Stigmatized In Asking for Psychological Help

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OP/ED Article By Omar Domenech



It is estimated that about 20 percent of soldiers returning from Iraq and Afghanistan suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). This affects not only the soldier but society as a whole. Today's veterans are also returning home to a challenging economic environment, with a national unemployment rate of more than 10 percent. Without proper counseling and treatment, PTSD can manifest itself in many ways: depression, domestic violence, child abuse and neglect, drug and/or alcohol abuse, inappropriate aggressiveness in the workplace, or suicide.

There are currently more than 23 million military veterans living in the United States, according to the National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics. In New York alone, there has been a huge influx of vets returning home. New York State currently has approximately 1,026,000 veterans, and New York City, 252,823, according to figures provided by the Department of Veterans Affairs. However, only a little more than 8 million received VA benefits and/or services in 2008 although far more need such services. This is a tremendous gap and its repercussions affect not only enlisted men and women but their spouses and families, loved ones, friends, and employers as well.

I know the needs and frustrations of veterans firsthand. I began my military career as a National Guardsman in 2000. I later enlisted full time and went on to serve active duty in Fort Bragg in North Carolina, which was followed by three tours of service in Iraq, where I earned the Purple Heart for wounds received in combat. Upon returning home, I observed that there were not

enough services to assist soldiers with mental health problems, unemployment and homelessness, marital and family issues, and the stress of day-to-day living. This is compounded by the fact that many veterans simply don't ask for help for fear of repercussions. As a result, I decided to study for my master's degree in social work so that I could help other veterans like myself. In the military, many soldiers become conditioned to believe that it's a sign of weakness to reach out for mental health help.

The stigma surrounding psychological health problems and accessing care is often a significant barrier to seeking mental health services for military personnel. According to the Mental Health Advisory Team (MHAT), established by the Office of the U.S. Army Surgeon General, some of the factors that discourage seeking help include being perceived as weak, embarrassment, concern that it will affect promotions, or being blamed by one's superiors for the problem. More than half of those surveyed in 2007 feared that members of their unit might treat them differently if they sought psychological help.

The need for social workers trained to deal with veterans' issues is critical. The social worker's challenge is to convey both to the veteran and to the military chain of command that it's okay for a soldier to ask for help, and that acknowledging a need for help makes you a stronger person and better soldier. The social worker must also point out to veterans that they are entitled to certain services and benefits and that they should not be shy in asking for them. Equally important, our government needs to provide a wide array of services to help meet the challenges that returning veterans have. More social workers need to be trained to work with returning veterans. Family members of troubled veterans could also benefit from specialized counsel.

The government needs to provide hotlines for those that are depressed or despondent, and jobs for those that have not been able to find work. Now, more than ever, we need to show our veterans that help is available, and that the American people care deeply about the men and women who have put their lives on the line for our country.

Omar Domenech is a master's degree candidate at Touro College's Graduate School of Social Work, which is offering a course on "Military Social Work" in 2010 on how to train social workers to counsel veterans, both while they are in service and after their military careers are over. He wrote this op-ed in response to his own observations about returning vets. He lives in Bay Ridge, Brooklyn.