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 service members and veterans 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 can be 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 increasing 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 resource mapping or have convened a Community Action Team (for more information, please see the Community Action Planning Tool), you may be familiar with some of the providers and organizations operating in the 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. As you assess the services available in your local you, you may find it useful to utilize a framework similar to that below.

- **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. Additionally, some veterans are uncomfortable visiting large VA hospitals and feel less intimidated using a nondescript Vet Center to access readjustment services.

- **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 and for that reason service members and veterans may prefer private care over other forms of available behavioral health care.
  - **Drawbacks:** Civilian providers may lack an understanding of military culture, which can make forming a bond with service members and veterans 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 Community Solution #2: 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. As a result, the barrier of entry to this type of behavioral health care is very low. Online care is also highly confidential as it takes place entirely in the home and the actual provider may be thousands of miles away.
  - **Drawbacks:** Online behavioral health therapy is a new technology, and its ultimate effectiveness in the behavioral health realm 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 technology, in-patient services, etc. normally provided with more traditional treatment methods.

### Volunteer Opportunities

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title:</th>
<th>Behavioral Health Liaison</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Task:</td>
<td>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.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attributes:</td>
<td>Enthusiastic, affable, interested in the military community</td>
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<td>Who:</td>
<td>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.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hours:</td>
<td>Flexible</td>
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### 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 local and regional VA Medical Center and/or Vet Center representatives to understand the level of care and benefits they provide.

- **Support Groups:** Participation in peer support groups can play an important role in increasing access to behavioral health care. These groups help individuals understand that they are not alone, and allow veterans and service members to discuss their issues as equals and in a familiar context.
  - 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.

- **Web Presence:** Using your findings from *Step 1: Identify and Evaluate Services Available to the Community*, prepare a comprehensive guide to the behavioral health providers in your area. This information can be distributed to local service members and veterans as a pamphlet; it should also be uploaded to an existing community website. If one does not exist, create one.
  - The [National Resource Directory](#) and United Way's [Information and Referral Search](#) are centralized portals that serve to direct interested parties to specific services within their community. You may wish to upload your data to these websites in addition to any local portals.
  - As you compile your collected information, try to focus on what a service member or veteran would need in order to initiate contact. Provide a general overview of the type of care or health provider, as well as specific information such as name, location, hours of availability, phone number, web site, accepted health insurance, and any other information you find relevant.

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**Volunteer Opportunities**

**Title:** Website Manager  
**Task:** Provide basic oversight of the project's web presence, to include maintaining provider contact information on community portals, as well as on the [National Resource Directory](#) and the United Way's [Information and Referral Search](#); assist those who email requesting additional support or information; ensure that the web presence and all relevant information remains up to date and accurate.  
**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.

- **Services and Support Fair:** A “Behavioral Health Services and Support Fair” is an excellent way to raise awareness and familiarize the community with available providers. This type of event allows interested service members and veterans to meet providers, learn about behavioral health issues, discuss behavioral health with their peers, and learn more about VA and DoD services. The event also 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.
  - **Partnership:** Contact local mental health organizations, Veteran Support Organizations (VSOs), local VA personnel, and other parties you believe might be willing to provide support for your event. Partnership provides additional resources, and may greatly simplify the planning, cost, and manpower required to host the event.
  - **Venue:** Securing a location for the event should be among your first priorities. Local support organizations may be able to provide you with the space needed; failing that, many private facilities are willing to donate the use of their space 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 auditoriums, university lecture halls, hotel conference rooms, and military facilities are a few of the buildings likely to be suitable for the event. 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 the planning process.
    - Be sure to consider whether the facility will provide tables, chairs and other materials. If they do not, it is important that the cost of such necessities is included during the event planning.
  - **Outreach:** Contact the local behavioral health community well in advance of your selected date. It is important that they be provided sufficient time to ensure that a representative will be present. The presence of support organizations, care providers, and other members of the behavioral health realm is the centerpiece of the event; it is important that as many be present as is feasible.
  - **Speakers:** Reach out to local behavioral health experts and invite them to speak during the event. 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 often more influential than a litany of facts and statistics. Enlisting local or national celebrities to participate in the event can increase attendance by both care providers and recipients, so don’t overlook this option if it is available to you.
  - **Staffing:** The event must be staffed with volunteers or employees. They will set up the event, direct providers to their assigned areas, 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 the event will determine how many volunteers or employees are needed to ensure success.

- **Management:** A smaller number of volunteers or employees should be designated as management personnel. They will organize workers, answer any more involved questions that attendees might have, and provide general oversight of the event.

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<tr>
<td><strong>Title:</strong> Event Manager</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Task:</strong> Organize chairs, tables, provider/organization placards, and other set-up items for the event; direct participants to their assigned areas; 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.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Attributes:</strong> Affable, enthusiastic, well-organized, interested in the military community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Who:</strong> Volunteers should be enthusiastic about behavioral health; no experience required; members of the military community are encouraged to apply.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Hours:</strong> Flexible</td>
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There are many important logistical steps involved in any large event; it is impossible to cover each in detail. While the above topics cover the largest logistical tasks, be sure to consider each of the following as well. Though less important individually, collectively they can have a significant impact on the overall atmosphere and success of the event:

- **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 event 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.

- **Sponsorship:** The sponsorship of businesses, nonprofits, and other organizations can yield significant benefits for the event. Funding, refreshments, materials and other event components can often be secured through sponsorship. Reach out to local parties and attempt to secure their participation. Many will be attracted by the positive PR derived from participation. As a sponsor incentive, consider offering special signage at refreshment tables and listing the event’s sponsors in any documents distributed.

- **Survey Administration:** Feedback from the event can be of immense value in future event planning. Develop a brief written survey to be administered near the end of the event. Keep it simple and to the point: “What did you find particularly useful or interesting? How can we improve the event for future attendees?” Questions in this vein will provide the most useful results. For more information, see the *Surveying Guideline Tool*. 
Measures of Success

It is difficult to accurately measure the effectiveness of the effort to increase the community’s access to behavioral health care. Doing so with a significant degree of certainty may require an independent evaluation consultant or other external expert, which is typically an expensive undertaking. However, even basic data tracking can provide substantial benefits by revealing general trends within the community and identifying potential gaps in the community strategy. Below are some suggested ways to begin tracking data:

- **Attendance:** Track the number of service members, veterans, and other members of the military community who attend community events designed to increase ease of access to behavioral health care. It may also be useful to track the number of participating government organizations, nonprofits, employers, and behavioral health providers.

- **Provider Reviews:** Establish a community-centric website through which service members, veterans, and military families can describe their experiences with local behavioral health care providers.

- **Survey Members of Military Community:** Provide military community members with a survey designed to assess overall awareness and ease of access to local behavioral health programs. For information about how to create and conduct this survey, please see the Surveying Guideline Tool.

- **Web Presence:** Track basic web analytic data, such as page views, advertising fees (if applicable), and unique monthly visitors to any sites or portals maintained by the community effort. Tracking the overall contributions of the effort to web resources (such as adding provider data to the National Resource Directory) may also be useful.
Additional Resources

  - Citizen Soldier Support Program (http://www ptsd va gov/ 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 (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**: [http://www.va.gov/](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/](http://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/](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 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/](http://www.realwarriors.net/)
  o 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.

  o A treatment model designed by the United States Department of Defenses' Deployment Health Clinical Center (DDHC) to screen, assess and treat active duty service members 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/](http://www.tricare.mil/)
  o TRICARE is the health care program serving uniformed service members, retirees and their families worldwide.