



Operation Not Forgotten helps veterans address mental health

By Melanie Dallas, LPC

Veterans hold a special place in America's heart. We salute those men and women who have fought for America, and honor those who have paid the ultimate price. We respect all those who wore the uniform – and those who currently do – who may not have served in combat, but are always ready to protect us when called. Without our veterans, America would be a different country, or perhaps not exist at all.

But as the U.S. remains engaged in its longest-ever war operation, we as a nation have learned a great deal about veterans' war experiences – and their needs when returning stateside. While many veterans have experienced traumatic physical injuries, we know that perhaps many more have experienced traumatic psychological injuries – injuries that can lead to mental illness, substance use and, too often, suicide.

According to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, veteran deaths from suicide continue to be higher than in the general population. A report issued by the agency in June found in 2015 veterans accounted for 14.3 percent of U.S. suicide deaths, even though veterans make up only 8.3 percent of the adult population. The rate of suicide was 2.1 times higher among veterans than non-veterans.

This report also clarified previous reports which said 20 veterans were taking their lives each day in the U.S. In fact, that number included veterans, active-duty and reserve military personnel. Nonetheless, in 2015, there were nearly 17 veterans dying by suicide each day. Some agencies working directly with veterans and service members feel the data consistently under-reports suicide rates in this population, and the actual rate is much higher.

As one of the largest providers of mental health and substance use treatment and recovery services in the state – serving veterans and residents across northwest Georgia – Highland Rivers Health knows timely treatment for mental health and substance use issues can reduce the risk of suicide.

Our services for veterans include outpatient mental health and substance use treatment, intensive outpatient and residential substance use treatment, supported employment and supportive housing, among others. We also have peer support services for veterans, in which veterans meet regularly in a group facilitated by a therapist to share challenges, strategies and solutions.

That's why Highland Rivers is proud to partner with Operation Not Forgotten (ONF), a non-profit veterans assistance organization headquartered in metro Atlanta, whose mission is to provide programs that develop mental, emotional, spiritual and social well-being for veterans.

Part of a larger initiative called Life Renewed, Operation Not Forgotten developed an outstanding veteran peer group curriculum that includes tools for addressing issues such as PTSD and suicidal ideation, to help veterans and their families transition to life outside the military.

After evaluating the ONF materials thoroughly, Highland Rivers therapists found them to be an excellent complement to our veteran peer groups. We began piloting ONF with our veterans group in Paulding County and are working to expand it to all of our veterans groups.

We should never forget our debt of gratitude to those who have served our country, but we must also never forget that those men and women sometimes suffer with wounds we cannot see. While we may seek to provide top-rate medical care to those whose military service has resulted in physical injury, we must never forget that mental health is a critical part of overall health and well-being.

Highland Rivers Health is proud to partner with Operation Not Forgotten to ensure the mental health of our veterans is not forgotten, but is respected, treated, supported and remains a priority – for our communities, our families and our nation.

For more information about Operation Not Forgotten, visit www.operationnotforgotten.com. For more information about Highland Rivers' veterans mental health and substance use treatment and recovery services, and veterans peer groups, call us at (800) 729-5700.