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Returning veterans get help

Workshop stresses need for treatment



Gail Dobinski of Southboro, rear, and Maryanne Hall of Westboro, front, listen to a speaker during the workshop.

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Dr. Jaine Darwin, cofounder and co-director of Strategic Outreach to Families of all Reservists, speaks during a workshop titled, "After the Return Home: Helping Veterans and Families Heal from Substance Abuse and Trauma," held at the Knights of Columbus hall yesterday. (T&G Staff Photos/TOM RETTIG)

WESTBORO — When Holly Marston's father returned from the Vietnam War, he had a lot of anger issues and trouble getting along with people. He got involved with drugs and eventually left the family.

Her father returned to the family a few years later, but he never to this day got any help for his problems. Ms. Marston said her father can function in his own little world, working from home, and that his only friends are other veterans.

"It takes about a year for the new veterans getting treatment to calm down. With Vietnam vets, it took about 30 years because they never really got the treatment to help calm their system down. It's just too bad the older guys didn't get that help. That is why I do what I do," said the 30-year-old Holliston resident, who now works with the state Department of Veteran Services.

Ms. Marston was one of the speakers yesterday at the daylong conference, "After the Return Home: Helping Veterans and Families Heal from Substance Abuse and Trauma," held at the Knights of Columbus. Almost 100 people, mostly counselors and other service providers, attended the conference, which was sponsored by Worcester-based Spectrum Health Systems Inc. and **Veterans Inc.**

The keynote speaker was Dr. Jaine Darwin, cofounder and co-director of Strategic Outreach to Families of all Reservists (SOFARUSA Inc.). The agency, established in 2005, provides pro bono support, psychotherapy, psycho-education and prevention services to extended family of National Guard reservists who serve in Afghanistan and Iraq. Of the nearly 2 million soldiers deployed since the war, about 876,000 have been National Guard or reserve component soldiers. She said 40 percent of all service personnel will suffer from anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder or a traumatic brain injury.

But the stigma of mental health impedes veterans' access to needed services. She said family members are brow-beaten because the idea of someone in the family getting mental health help upsets the applecart and leaves people concerned about the impact it will have on their careers. Left untreated, mental health issues from war can lead to infidelity, divorce, domestic violence, drug and alcohol problems and suicide. She said that between 12 percent and 50 percent of returning vets are involved in domestic violence. More alarming are current statistics that say 18 veterans commit suicide every day, while 950 others attempt suicide each day. By the end of 2009, 2,100 active duty members of the armed forces had committed suicide, compared to about 4,200 soldiers who had died in Iraq, she said. In addition, one-third of all the homeless in this country are veterans of some war, often because of their mental problems.

"It's really horrifying to think that (veterans) are almost as much at risk when they come home as they are when they're in a combat zone," said Ms. Darwin. "People like breathe a sigh of relief when they come home and say, 'That's over.' But, we know now that it's not over. When a soldier is deployed, the whole family serves. And, when a soldier returns, the whole family is impacted."

There are currently more than 700,000 children with at least one parent deployed and 28 million immediate family members affected by the war. She said one-third of all military children are at risk for psychosocial problems. Statistics also show that child abuse and neglect by the parent left at home also rises by an estimated 30 to 50 percent. Ms. Darwin said that while 40 percent of soldiers come home with depression and anxiety, the same is true for family members who have been waiting at home. She said service providers, teachers and others in the community have to explore all avenues of access to reach out to military members and their family members.

"The conclusion really to this is unless we intervene, we face multiple generational transmission of trauma which is a continuous legacy from World War II and from Vietnam," she said. "And, we know from the Holocaust literature that people three and four generations later who don't even know the person who served are still showing symptoms that are adaptive to the server."