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SEATTLE, WA (KPLU) - Repeat deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan are causing record rates of mental health issues.

Military health providers recognize this and have been increasing available care. But it's not enough. And some who serve still don't qualify. A new civilian group has stepped in to help. KPLU's Bellamy Pailthorp has the story.

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Kristie with some of the comfort items her son needed around him on the floor where he slept after his Dad was deployed to Iraq for a second time Photo by Bellamy Pailthorp

Reporter's Transcript:

(roll nat sound of play beneath tracks)

In the suburbs near Ft Lewis, a four-year-old is horsing around with his younger sister. His Dad is in the Stryker Brigade, and his mom says this carefree play is a huge improvement. When he was two, the little boy's Dad was deployed to Iraq for a second time. Kristie, the mom, says she wasn't prepared for the toll it would take on her young son.

"Within a week of my husband leaving, my son pretty much stopped sleeping. He couldn't, he wouldn't sleep in a bed anymore. The number of stuffed animals he needed, and special pillows, comfort items, it was incredible. And sometimes it would take two, three hours to put him to bed at night."

With his Dad back with the family in Puyallup now, he's doing better. But a year and a half ago he was suffering from extreme separation anxiety. He couldn't go to friends' birthday parties or take swimming lessons - even just driving on the freeway would sometimes cause panic attacks. And some nights he wouldn't sleep at all.

"He would just lay in bed and tell me, 'I'm not going to close my eyes because you'll leave me Mom.' And so when he was verbalizing that and he was struggling in school because he was falling asleep and he would just lay awake midnight, one o' clock in the morning and just lay there and not close his eyes."

Kristie, who asked that we use only her first name, consulted his teachers and other military wives and concluded this was more than just typical toddler behavior. She needed counseling for her son.

"My son was only about two and a half, almost three at the time. And I was pretty much told that he

was too young to need counseling. And that I should pretty much medicate him to make him sleep."

Kristie felt that should be the last resort, so she found a counselor anyway - outside the military. The treatment wasn't covered by her insurance, but she was desperate. As it turned out, she didn't have to pay anything. The counselor was part of something called Soldiers Project Northwest - and would donate one hour of counseling a week.

"And when she told me about it -- it was all I could do not to cry. Because truly, I was going, I don't know how we're going to do this, but we need to make this happen for all of our sakes."

Kristie says eight months into the treatment, she's learned how to help her son express his feelings. He's sleeping better now. The panic attacks are subsiding and he's managed to finish swimming lessons. Kristie's husband Ken is a career soldier and says there's another reason he likes the Soldiers Project. Although he's seen the official mental health care options for the military improve by leaps and bounds in the last few years, he still thinks a lot of men and women in the service hesitate to access them.

"They may think that's a sign of weakness, that it's gonna be a black mark on their careers. So this is an opportunity that they can go get the help that they still need that maybe they weren't comfortable seeking through the military."

Registered Psychiatric Nurse Trisha Pierce runs the Soldiers Project Northwest from her home in Stanwood. She's recruited nearly fifty other volunteer professionals who specialize in trauma counseling. It's modeled after a similar project in California.

"I would say if somebody could get into the VA or through any of the military sources and get help there - that's great. You know, I think it's easy, it's right there on the base for people that are active duty. But, there are people that aren't going to do that. And that's where I think we can really help."

And besides active duty folks who don't want to leave a record of mental health care, there are a lot of people this project helps who would never be covered by traditional military benefits.

"Same sex partners - that's the first one I always think of. You know, extended family members, aunts and uncles, best friends, you know, roommates that people might live with."

Pierce says it's an especially busy time for the project. Fort Lewis is deploying 18-thousand soldiers by the end of next January. And the Washington National Guard has about 25-hundred members returning home from Iraq this summer. Official statistics show that at least twenty percent of them will suffer from diagnosable mental health conditions such as panic attacks, Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome, and other anxiety disorders. And nearly all of them will have trouble re-integrating and high levels of stress.

"There's gonna be families really impacted. You know, because these folks that have had multiple deployments, it's really, really rough."

Official channels are bracing themselves too. Dr Steve Hunt directs the Deployment Clinic inside Seattle's VA Medical Center. He says they've just hired four new mental health specialists and four primary care doctors to handle returning combat veterans. But they welcome help from the community - because there are so many family members the VA and other military channels just can't cover.

"And what we try to do here at the VA is not just say, well we can't do that, but to say: here's how we'd do that. Here's this list of resources that we have, including places like Soldiers Project, here's a number you can call."

Back in Puyallup, Ken is enjoying time with his family before he deploys to Iraq for a third time.

"Daddy!"

"Hi little girl. How ya doin', princess?"

He's with the 4th Stryker Brigade, which could ship out as soon as early August. Ken says he's concerned that his daughter will struggle with his absence the way his son did during his last deployment. She's now two and has had a chance to bond with him. But with counseling available, he knows it won't be nearly as difficult this time around.

"I'll have that peace of mind while I'm over there, knowing that, if she does go through this, well the program is already in place to get the help that they'll need. And hopefully we won't have the same level of issues that we did with our son."

He says knowing a community of professionals outside the military is willing to step in is especially comforting.

Bellamy Pailthorp, KPLU News, Seattle.

For more information:

[The Soldiers Project](#)

[VA Puget Sound Deployment Health Clinic](#)

[Stryker Brigade News](#)

[Washington Army National Guard, 81st Brigade](#)

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