

## **Faith groups reach out to provide services to military veterans and families**

By Nancy Gertner | Wednesday, July 22, 2009

Minnesota is one of only a handful of states that do not have an active military base. Perhaps this has inspired us to be more innovative in ways to deliver services to members of the armed forces and their families.

Minnesota has pioneered programs to provide support for military families, and a new development is a partnership between the Minnesota Department of Veterans Affairs and Lutheran Social Services (LSS). The partnership was enabled by an appropriation of \$500,000 via the Minnesota Legislature in 2007.

Called Minnesota Service CORE, the acronym refers to the services offered: Case management, Outreach, Referral to other services, and Education. The scope of services includes individual and family counseling, financial counseling, debt management, addiction assessments and referral, disability services and in-home counseling. LSS is the largest, statewide nonprofit social service organization in Minnesota, with more than 2,200 employees who serve in 300 communities. Lutheran Social Services has an existing statewide network of resources with offices in Alexandria, Brainerd, Detroit Lakes, Duluth, Fergus Falls, Mankato, Moorhead, St. Cloud, Willmar and the Twin Cities. This state-funded program may actually serve veterans and military families better than the federally funded programs of the Department of Veterans' Affairs because of its decentralized organization and ability to do in-home counseling, along with fewer restrictions on which family members the program can serve.

### **No cost for services to veterans and families**

Lutheran Social Services is limited to marketing the CORE services directly to military families, so the utilization rate has been low, and the contract with LSS was renewed for 2010 and 2011. There is no cost for services provided to veterans and their immediate family members, and no requirement for any relationship with the Lutheran Church. LSS may use third-party billing to recoup costs from private insurance companies if and when possible. The number of counseling sessions is not limited, and is determined by needs of the veteran and the family.

LSS counseling services are available to family members including parents, children and significant others, individuals not typically included in services available through the Department of Defense or Department of Veterans' Affairs. The veteran's need must be verified by LSS, and the character of military service as documented on a DD214 form must be honorable.

"We can help any family member that is impacted by a member's military service," said Mary Beth Galey, LSS senior counseling director. Galey also stated that services can be provided on an individual or a family basis, and that includes helping veterans and families deal with issues like survivor guilt, depression, anxiety, aging and independent living, and with health issues like Parkinson's disease.

### **Faith groups volunteer**

While Lutheran Social Services has a contractual relationship with the Minnesota Department of Veterans Affairs, churches and faith groups voluntarily engage in providing services to military families and veterans as a ministry. Metro area Lutheran churches active in this ministry include Calvary Lutheran, Golden Valley; Lord of Life Lutheran, Maple Grove; and North Heights Lutheran Church, Arden Hills.

Churches, like LSS, concentrate on helping veterans and family members with healing wounds that are invisible or spiritual. The Veterans Ministry Roundtable is a group of Twin Cities pastoral and mental health-care providers, including military veterans and retired chaplains, from numerous congregations. The group meets every two months to learn from each other's ministry with this special demographic group.

One of the Roundtable members, Amy Blumenshine, is also one of the co-authors of a new book just published by Whole Person Associates, Duluth: "Welcome them Home — Help Them Heal: Pastoral Care and Ministry with Service Members Returning from War."

"We wrote the book to give churches and pastoral care providers tools for accompanying veterans and their families in their transitions home from war, holistically addressing not just their physiological and psychological needs but their spiritual maladies, as well," said Blumenshine. A diaconal minister at Our Saviour's Lutheran Church in Minneapolis, Blumenshine co-wrote the book with Rev. John Sippola, former Minnesota National Guard chaplain; Rev. Don Tubesing, wellness trainer and publisher; and Dr. Valerie Yancey, nursing professor with a specialty in parish nursing.

### **Repeat deployments**

Of course, even the world's best counselors cannot eliminate the

occupational hazards of repeat deployments. The tragic deaths of five service members at a counseling center in Iraq this spring prompted the military to investigate the effectiveness of its mental-health care systems, along with a renewed focus on the practice of personnel serving multiple deployments to combat zones.

Army studies of soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan show that roughly one in five develop post-traumatic stress disorder, depression or anxiety. Mental-health problems can grow more severe with each successive deployment. Studies show that non-commissioned officers (enlisted personnel E-5 and above) who are considered the "backbone" of the military are affected by each deployment. Nearly three out of 10 begin suffering mental-health problems by the third or fourth deployment. Causes of mental-health issues can include combat-related trauma, extended deployments and brain injuries.

Problems faced by providers delivering services include the stigma that continues to be a factor preventing some people from seeking help for personal problems. Stigma is an issue we can all work to counter by encouraging the people we know to seek and accept help with personal problems.

LSS is owned by the six Minnesota synods of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA); it has a history of providing social services to Minnesotans for 144 years, beginning with adoption services in 1865. Referrals to the LSS services can be made by any county veterans service officer, through the LSS hotline at 1-888-881-8261 or the LINKVET hotline (1-888-LINKVET or 1-888-546-5838). LinkVet, a toll-free, one-stop customer-service line, was activated for all Minnesota veterans in 2007.

*Nancy Gertner is a retired Navy officer and a member of Oak Grove Lutheran Church in Richfield. She is a community activist involved in organizations supporting veterans, including the Warrior to Citizen Campaign and Women Veterans' Initiative Working Group.*

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