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## Historic First for Social Work

By Cadonna Dory on September 2, 2009 8:07 AM



Social work graduate students Jason Imhoof and Cassandra Rush are sworn in as members of the ROTC program.

Photo/Dietmar Quistorf

On Aug. 24, USC School of Social Work graduate students Cassandra Rush and Jason Imhoof took their first steps toward becoming among the first students nationwide to earn a master's degree in social work with a specialization in military and veteran services.

On that day, they also were sworn in as members of the university's Reserved Officers' Training Corp. program. When they graduate in two years, they will be fully commissioned officers of the U.S. Army. Officials believe the two also may be the first military social work/ROTC students in the country.

The cadets started taking classes in both programs this fall, thanks to the ROTC Cadet Command in Virginia that provided them with full scholarships. ROTC has provided scholarships to graduate students before but never in the area of social work.

The USC military social work program - the first of its kind at a major research university - prepares students to help the nation's armed forces personnel, military veterans and their families manage the pressures of military life and postwar adjustments.

"This program is about serving our soldiers when they are deployed and serving them when they come home," said Paul Maiden, vice dean of the social work school.

Lt. Col. Robert Huntly, brigade commander at USC, said although graduate students have enrolled in the ROTC program, this is the first time that students have specifically enrolled in a military program. And it couldn't have come at a better time, he added.

According to the nonprofit RAND Corp., a substantial number of the 1.7 million military service members returning from Iraq and Afghanistan face mental health problems. A 2008 study by the institute found that an estimated 18.5 percent of military personnel back from deployment reported symptoms consistent with a diagnosis of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) or depression.

Also, since 2003, there has been a steady increase in suicides among active duty soldiers, with the highest numbers occurring this past year. That does not include hundreds of veterans who take their lives each month.

For active duty soldiers, there is an abundance of resources that service members can take advantage of for their physical and mental health needs, Huntly said. "But when soldiers go home, they do not have the same level of service that they have in active duty," he added. "And PTSD ... it's a reality."

Rush and Imhoof have known since their undergraduate years that they wanted to do social work in a military setting. Rush, 24, wants to be a social worker with the U.S. Army. She got her bachelor's degree in sociology from the University of California, Irvine and later enlisted.

Imhoof, 27, earned his degree in psychology from Thomas Edison State College in New Jersey. He has been in the National Guard for more than three years and was stationed in Sacramento working in mental health services.

Lt. Col. Eric Frye, director of mental health services for the California National Guard, convinced Imhoof that becoming a licensed clinical social worker was the way to go.

Imhoof said he watched Frye, a licensed clinical social worker, work tirelessly to garner attention and support from politicians and others who could help him provide mental health services to the growing number of men and women in need of it.

"In Sacramento, I noticed a tremendous need for our soldiers," Imhoof said. "In the reserves, the PTSD rate is high, the stress rate is high and they don't have the same luxuries as people on base."

Those interested in working in the military as a mental health worker must become a licensed clinical social worker. In California, this includes getting a master's degree in social work, then completing 3,200 hours of clinical work experience and passing two written exams. This requirement led Rush and Imhoof to USC after learning of the School of Social Work's new program.

Lt. Col. Valvincent Reyes, a clinical assistant professor for the military social work program, heard about Rush and Imhoof and thought it would be an excellent opportunity to get the ROTC involved, since both graduate students were enlisted. Reyes is the one responsible for getting approval for the scholarships.

ROTC is a college-based, officer-commissioning program that focuses on leadership development, problem solving, strategic planning and professional ethics. It is designed to make Rush, Imhoof and others who serve in the armed forces better officers.

“This is a win-win situation for us all,” Reyes said. “These cadets will become more well-rounded officers due to the ROTC training, and the military will be getting highly qualified mental health professionals from a top-notch university and program.”

Master Sgt. Jesse Duran, a senior military instructor for the ROTC program, concurred that there is great need for graduates with both military and social work experience. Duran, who has been in the Army for 21 years, said it is difficult for soldiers to readjust to home and family life after having spent more than a year in a battle zone. “Just because you get home doesn’t mean you’re at home,” Duran said.

After his 2005-06 tour in Iraq, he said it was hard to find where he fit in. “My wife and kids had been living life without me for a long time and at first I couldn’t find my place,” he said. “There were also things that I saw in Iraq that I didn’t want to talk about. Those kinds of things cause a lot of tension in a marriage and family life.”

They also can affect a person’s psyche, he said.

Fortunately for Duran, who has been married for 20 years, he and his wife have been able to make it through the difficult times. But others are not as lucky, Duran said, and can benefit from the services of social workers like Rush and Imhoof who understand what it is to be a soldier and are trained to help others deal with issues specific to military life.