



STATE OF MARYLAND

DHMH PRESS RELEASE

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LT. GOVERNOR BROWN ANNOUNCES UNIVERSITY OF MARYLAND-STATE PARTNERSHIP TO TARGET MARYLAND VETERANS' MENTAL HEALTH NEEDS

Baltimore, Md. (June 21, 2012) - Today, Lt. Governor Anthony G. Brown, a Colonel in the U.S. Army Reserves and the nation's highest ranking elected official to have served a tour of duty in Iraq, announced that the University of Maryland and the Maryland Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (DHMH) have launched a new partnership to meet the behavioral and mental health needs of Maryland veterans and their families. The partnership will identify gaps in veterans' services and train mental health professionals, primary care doctors, and clergy to better understand and address the unique needs of our veterans. The initiative will also develop peer support networks for veterans reintegrating to civilian life.

Governor Martin O'Malley and Lt. Governor Brown have made veterans' health a top priority. In 2008, Lt. Governor Brown led efforts to pass the Veterans Behavioral Health Act and chairs the Veterans Behavioral Health Advisory Board. This legislation provided veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan with expanded access to behavioral and mental health services to ease the transition from combat to the community. In 2009, the Maryland General Assembly partnered with Brown to expand this program to all veterans.

"Maryland's veterans and their families have sacrificed so much for our country," said Lt. Governor Brown. "The demands of multiple deployments have placed significant stress on veterans and their families and contributed to the signature wounds of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, including posttraumatic stress and traumatic brain injury. Too often, health professionals are not adequately trained to treat these and other health issues that veterans face. Our new partnership between the State and the University of Maryland School of Public Health will help improve the care that our veterans receive in order to ensure the most effective support for those who have served."

A team of faculty from the University of Maryland School of Public Health with special expertise in military families and public health programs will lead the new project, the Maryland Veterans Resilience Initiative:

The project will:

- Establish a Veterans Resilience Initiative Advisory Council with representatives from state government agencies, military and veteran organizations, nonprofits, behavioral health networks, the faith community, veterans and family members to identify gaps in services, coordinate training across the state, and communicate critical mental health information to veteran families.
- Conduct an online survey with Maryland primary care and behavioral health professionals to assess training needs and capacity for delivering services that are sensitive to military culture and veterans' needs.

- Train health professionals and clergy to effectively serve veterans and their families in both urban and rural communities using a combination of in-person and video conferencing formats.
- Develop peer support networks for veterans returning to the community, beginning in community college and university settings.

The project aims to improve behavioral health and support services for Maryland's veterans, more than 28,000 of whom have returned from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Thousands more are joining their ranks with the drawdown of troops from Iraq and Afghanistan. Nationwide studies find that one in five veterans of the recent conflicts suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) or traumatic brain injury (TBI). Many more struggle with challenges of reintegrating into their communities, including re-establishing family relationships and obtaining health care, housing, and employment. Veterans are often reluctant to seek assistance because of the stigma of asking for help and concerns about negative career impacts. Among those who do seek mental health treatment, one of the most common reasons for discontinuing is civilian professionals' failure to understand military culture and the impact of combat experiences.

Dr. Laura Herrera, DHMH's Chief Medical Officer, explains, "This important partnership will increase the number of health care providers and professionals who are equipped to identify and address veterans' needs, as well as link them to appropriate services. Our goal is to address behavioral health problems early on and to prevent future problems through a coordinated network of training and peer support."

The School of Public Health team, led by professors Sally Koblinsky, Leigh Leslie, and Sandra Quinn, will work with the Advisory Council to implement the state needs assessment. Findings will be used to design trainings that increase professionals' knowledge of military culture and the impacts of deployment on veterans and family members, including children. Trainings will not only provide strategies for addressing mental health, substance use/abuse, and suicide prevention, but will also focus on employment-related stressors, women veterans' issues (including military sexual trauma), and reintegration into family life.

The project will also establish peer support programs to assist returning veterans in their transition to civilian and campus life. University of Maryland student veteran leaders, trained in peer facilitation, will work with targeted Maryland community colleges and four-year institutions to create new student veteran groups, establish "buddy" mentoring programs, and address behavioral health issues. This effort supports and extends Maryland's College Collaboration for Student Veterans, which seeks to improve veteran services on 21 college campuses. Peer support is known to help veterans navigate campus life, build new social relationships and reduce the stigma of seeking professional help. Such support is also likely to promote college retention and graduation among this group.

"Fostering resilience among our veterans is an important public health goal," said Family Science Professor Koblinsky, lead project investigator and a founding member of the university's Veterans Services Steering Committee. "We look forward to working with the state to ensure that veterans and their families get the support they need and deserve. We hope this project will become a model for other states and universities and have a national impact."

About the University of Maryland School of Public Health

The University of Maryland School of Public Health (SPH) works to promote and protect the health and well-being of the citizens of Maryland, the nation, and the world through interdisciplinary education, research, public policy and practice. Many of the school's research, education and service activities focus on eliminating health disparities through innovative initiatives that promote health equity and improve health literacy.

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