

UMD Initiative Supporting the Health of Maryland Veterans

November 8, 2013

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<http://www.umdrightnow.umd.edu/news/umd-initiative-supporting-health-md-veterans>

COLLEGE PARK, Md. – More than 28,000 Maryland veterans have returned home from the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, and most have made a successful transition to civilian life. But for some, the road home from war has included challenges unique to their military service. The Maryland Veterans Resilience Initiative (MaVRI), a project led by the University of Maryland School of Public Health in partnership with the Maryland Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, is making sure that those who have served our country receive quality health care and support.

Multiple deployments to combat zones have stressed veterans and their families, contributing to health problems such as post-traumatic stress and traumatic brain injury. Growing numbers of veterans are turning to civilian health professionals for care, but many of these providers have not been sufficiently trained to treat veterans' health issues, MaVRI researchers have found. To address this knowledge gap, the MaVRI project is training mental health and primary care professionals throughout Maryland to better understand military culture and experiences and to appropriately treat the health care needs of veterans and their family members.

**MARYLAND VETERANS
RESILIENCE INITIATIVE**

In addition, as record numbers of veterans return to college under the post-9/11 GI Bill, the MaVRI project is developing peer support networks for veterans on community college and university campuses across the state to help them achieve their educational and personal goals. "Maryland veterans and their families have sacrificed so much for our nation and they deserve all the support we can provide," said Public Health Professor Sally Koblinsky, lead investigator of MaVRI. "They bring tremendous resources to our state, including leadership, global experience, and unique skills, but they may also face some challenges as a result of their wartime experience."

When the MaVRI project launched in 2012, Dr. Koblinsky and colleagues, Dr. Leigh Leslie and Emily Cook, surveyed more than 3,000 licensed mental health and primary care professionals to gauge their knowledge and confidence in treating veterans' conditions. This survey is believed to be the first statewide effort in the U.S. to assess the knowledge and training needs of health care professionals related to veterans' issues. Notably, the vast majority of those surveyed were not veterans themselves, lacked familiarity with military culture and best practices for treating veterans' conditions, and had limited confidence in treating them.

MaVRI used feedback from the survey participants to design trainings for state providers that covered topics such as the deployment cycle and reintegration challenges, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), traumatic brain injury (TBI), sleep disorders, family stress and relationship problems, suicide prevention, and women veterans' health. To date, 700 state social workers, psychologists, counselors, marriage and family therapists, and primary care providers have completed these trainings. In a recent, two-day MaVRI program, the Center for Deployment

Psychology trained 140 licensed mental health professionals on Prolonged Exposure Therapy, an evidence-based treatment for PTSD.

“MaVRI has been a tremendous success, greatly increasing the numbers of health providers who are educated about veteran-specific issues,” said Shauna Donahue, director of Maryland’s Commitment to Veterans, a program of the Maryland Department of Health and Mental Hygiene. “The project should have a significant impact on our state’s ability to provide high quality behavioral health care to veterans and their family members.”

The MaVRI project is also making a difference in the lives of veterans attending college. Student veterans from the University of Maryland work as peer support facilitators at six of the state’s college campuses with the goal of establishing new student veteran organizations and developing support communities for those adapting to post-military life.

Jason Theis, a junior microbiology major at UMD and a veteran of the U.S. Army, worked as a peer support facilitator last semester at UMBC and Howard Community College. Theis facilitated focus groups and met with student veterans at UMBC, organized veterans’ community service activities and helped Howard Community College to open a new student veterans’ center.



Henry Carbajales (pictured left), who began work as a peer support facilitator with MaVRI in fall 2012, got involved to help veterans navigate an academic world that is often much different than the military one. Carbajales, a Marine Corps veteran who served three deployments in Iraq, understands the adjustments involved in returning to civilian life.

“There are lots of things in the military that you take for granted: food, housing, friends, companionship,” Carbajales said. “I was gone for eight years ... It’s like everybody already has their own lives, so where do I stand now?”

A senior geography major, Carbajales remembers being new to the maze of financial aid forms, veterans benefits and scholarships. “Through MaVRI, I can pass information on to fellow veterans at other schools who might not have the same resources,” Carbajales said. He is also building camaraderie by bringing community college veterans to University of Maryland’s annual veterans’ football game and organizing a Veterans’ Ball for student veterans on three college campuses.

With the enhanced and growing network of health care professionals equipped to help veterans successfully transition back to civilian life, and the creation of peer support systems on college campuses, the MaVRI project is insuring that Maryland veterans receive the attention they need and deserve.

Visit <http://www.sph.umd.edu/fmsc/mavri/> for more information about the Maryland Veterans Resilience Initiative.