

Veterans Squaring Away Veterans



VSAV FACTS

ADJUSTMENT STRESS AND PTS

Adjustment stress for service members transitioning from the military can exacerbate incipient PTS

STRESS MANAGEMENT

The unique rapport that exists between new veterans and their established peers can be employed to mitigate both adjustment stress and PTS

SUPPORT WITHOUT STIGMA

VSAV leverages veterans' commitment to "take care of their own" to facilitate interactions with new veterans through which many pending crises can be quietly identified and addressed

VETERANS' COMMITMENT FOR LIFE

Service to country, and to each other, never ends



Addressing the Critical Adjustment Needs of America's Newest Veterans

VSAV (*vee'-save*) has been formed to harness abundant and motivated resources from among America's earlier veterans in the effort to mitigate a serious epidemic of stress that is rapidly proliferating among new veterans with disastrous results on both their lives and society as a whole.

This epidemic results from the psychological impacts of war, prolonged separation from family, and other stresses unique to America's military personnel. The difficulties they face during active service are often exacerbated by the additional stresses inherent in the transition back to civilian life. Although such adjustment issues are common, in some circumstances they can cause incipient psychological abnormalities to grow into a more serious condition known as Post Traumatic Stress (PTS). Symptoms of PTS include confusion, depression, and substance abuse that, in extreme cases, can lead to unpredictable behavior that results in violence.

Both adjustment issues and PTS are difficult to diagnose and those suffering from these conditions may be unaware of their own symptomatic behavior until called to their attention by family members, co-workers or friends - or when violence erupts and leads to intervention by police or other first responders.

Compounding the diagnostic difficulty is the well-documented fact that there is also very limited access to adequate care. After

leaving the military, veterans disperse to every corner of the country – often far away from knowledgeable clinicians or treatment facilities. There they have to deal alone with the isolation of relocating and reintegrating into civilian life and the workforce.

Experience indicates that struggling with even the most routine frustrations in starting a new life apart from the all-supporting military can be a trigger for the onset of adjustment issues – and PTS. However, research has also determined that timely help with reducing the burdens of transition can mitigate the risks of such triggering events, and thereby potentially obviate the high costs to society inherent in the chronic problems associated with PTS that include substance dependence, family violence, homelessness, mental illness, and dramatically increasing rates of suicide.

VSAV has developed a program to provide credible, timely, and highly cost effective services to assist new veterans in their transitions to civilian life wherever they may locate. This will be accomplished by mobilizing the "all-supporting" and highly motivated resources of established veterans who have already successfully walked that path. The VSAV founders are uniquely qualified and experienced to engage these extensive and readily available resources in an expanded effort to fulfill the obligations of a grateful society to the veterans who have served it so well.

COMMITMENT TO VETERANS

"For their service and sacrifice, warm words of thanks from a grateful nation are more than warranted, but they aren't nearly enough. We also owe our veterans the care they were promised and the benefits that they have earned. We have a sacred trust with those who wear the uniform of the United States of America. It's a commitment that begins at enlistment, and it must never end. But we know that for too long, we've fallen short of meeting that commitment. Too many wounded warriors go without the care that they need. Too many veterans don't receive the support that they've earned. Too many who once wore our nation's uniform now sleep in our nation's streets."

President of the United States, March 19, 2009



The Case for Community Support for Veterans

The argument for greater psychological support for veterans continues to be made at the highest levels of American society and is supported by data collected from a wide array of medical, academic and governmental resources. The most alarming statistic has just been updated by the Associated Press (AP) in a news release dated 15 January 2013: "Pentagon figures obtained Monday by the Associated Press show 349 suicides among active-duty troops last year, up from 301 the year before and exceeding the Pentagon's own internal projection of 325. Last year's total is the highest since the Pentagon began closely tracking suicides in 2001. It exceeds the 295 Americans who died in Afghanistan last year, by the AP's count."^{1,2,3}

However, suicide rates among combat veterans are only one part of the problem. A 2011 Pew Social Trends study states that veterans are returning from service with greater needs than ever before. Sadly, more than 44% of veterans who served in the ten years since the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks report that re-entry into civilian life was difficult.⁴ Gates (2012) estimates that rates of stress for deployed U.S. military personnel are as high as 14-16%, twice as high as the general U.S. population.⁵ Additionally, in a study of student veterans enrolled in colleges and universities, Rudd (2011) reports that 35% report severe anxiety, 24% report severe depression, and 46% report significant symptoms of PTSD.⁶

Even more alarming is the rate of homelessness among veterans. A "Project CHALLENGE" report by the VA in 2009 stated that an estimated 107,000 veterans are homeless on any given night and there was an 85% increase in the number of veteran families experiencing homelessness from the previous year. Veterans are also 50% more likely than non-veterans to be homeless.⁷

Mental health providers are increasingly challenged with cases of veterans who suffer not only from psychological issues

related to their service, but are also suffering from physical complications such as pain, sleep disorders, chronic illnesses, and neurological complaints. The Department of Defense (DoD), the VA, and civilian agencies that support these veterans are aware of and responding with both resources and policy changes in their efforts to heal the psychological wounds faced by our returning warfighters. However, it is increasingly recognized that these efforts are not stemming the swelling tide.

Mental health providers recognized early on the growing need for more providers, as well as the need to also "think outside the box" in providing mental health care for new veterans. One example of such response by psychological professionals is the growing participation in non-profits, such as the highly publicized "Give an Hour" Foundation led by Dr. Van Dahlen⁸ to which providers outside TRICARE (the Military medical insurance program) routinely donate hours of their services to members of the military, veterans, and their families. However, since the practices of such motivated psychological professionals are mostly concentrated in urban areas of the country, they are not readily accessible by the majority of new veterans who disperse widely upon separation from the military.

The American Psychological Association (APA) has made the health and wellness of veterans a priority, and while individualized and group treatment programs remain the most prevalent forms of care, initiatives to provide *greater access to and involve other aspects of the community* have been receiving significantly increased attention. The challenge is to develop effective ways to inform and motivate community resources, and it is in that effort in which the VSAV program will have its most meaningful impact.

Research also points to the efficacy of programs based on peer interactions in reducing the stigma of seeking professional help and the hesitancy that results therefrom. An

important article in the Journal of the American Medical Association suggests that veterans often feel a sense of “disconnection between their experience as warriors and perspectives they encounter trying to obtain the help they need.”⁹ Established veterans have a unique opportunity to assist in bridging this gap. Because of their special rapport based on shared experience, those veterans can act as “trusted advisors” in moving new veterans toward the various kinds of help they need in their transitions to civilian life. With proper training, they can also act as facilitators in simple adjustment techniques that have been shown to be effective in treating trauma victims. One such example is Narrative Exposure Technique (NET) in which the subject is assisted in constructing a written narrative of his life (focusing primarily on the most painful events) over four to six weekly meetings. Established veterans, when directed and supported by mental health professionals, can be trained to effectively facilitate such interactions.

Programs in both religious and educational environments also expand the outreach to new veterans. APA psychologists Dr.'s Rudd and Ake strongly promote veteran reintegration and mental health through the use of faith-based organizations and through college campus counseling centers.¹⁰ Research suggests that veterans are often better able to adjust to civilian life as a result of connections with such well-established sources of support that exist outside and away from any stigma that may exist in traditional mental health pathways.

In a seminal article in *American Psychologist* (Apr, 2012)¹¹, Dr. Anthony Jorm raises the fact that public awareness of mental health “*first aid*” is lacking and that community focus on mental health literacy may be the best way to ensure that early intervention, prevention, and effective treatments are available to veterans nationwide. Additional research by Straits-Troster (2011)¹² suggests that this is particularly true in *rural communities* and that new veterans are better served when all members of the community (including medical personnel, clergy, and law enforcement, among others) are educated about military culture, deployment-related mental health issues, and veteran based services. This is another area in which the VSAV program is designed to be uniquely impactful.

The VSAV Solution

As noted above, military leaders as well as researchers suggest that access to community support and the reduction of the stigma in seeking care are likely the most effective strategies in reducing the stress among veterans: “It is imperative that intervention strategies . . . prioritize the reinforcing protective effects of family and peer connections.”¹³

VSAV has developed a solution that meets all of the currently understood criteria for mitigating such adjustment issues, and as a result, also the potential for reducing the onset of PTS. The VSAV solution uniquely mobilizes the nation’s established veterans to play vital roles in community educational efforts in order to create an environment that is supportive of, and responsive to, new veterans in dealing with the stresses of their transitions to civilian life. These established veterans are strongly motivated to engage in this effort because of a historical reality that has been repeatedly demonstrated for generations: *veterans are always veterans --- and they never stop taking care of their own.*

VSAV’s program is based on the concept of building a timely interaction between established veterans and those just leaving the military. Because shared experience is the best basis for good communication, new veterans have demonstrated an affinity and willingness to talk to established veterans and accept support from them. Both have “been there, done it” and their shared experiences enable a bond that spans generations, economic conditions, types of military service, and many other factors that would otherwise inhibit building trust. Most significantly, once that communication - and the trust - has been established, research has shown that the risk of progression of adjustment issues into extreme stress-related behavior is significantly diminished.

VSAV Peer Advisors

The VSAV program is based on engaging and training former military medics and other specialists to develop and support a national network of veterans established in local communities to interact with and facilitate transitions for new veterans entering those communities. These “Peer Advisors” will coordinate efforts by established veterans (i.e. “Community Facilitators”), other volunteers, and community health professionals in providing knowledgeable support and advice for those new veterans for whom the separation from the military is proving to be particularly challenging. The Peer Advisors will undergo rigorous, medically supervised VSAV training in recognizing and responding to the symptoms of advanced adjustment issues and PTS. They will be alerted to reports of concern by Community Facilitators, family members, or the new veterans themselves and will respond personally and appropriately in an attempt to evaluate and defuse crisis situations. They will work with the Community Facilitators to engage local agencies and healthcare providers on a timely basis when a critical episode may be imminent or is already underway.

As noted above, the VSAV Peer Advisors will be selected primarily from among former military medics who have undergone the rigorous medical, psychological, and operational training that qualified them for their military medical service. By having had the experience of multiple forward deployments, the Peer Advisors will also have the personal histories that create a level of credibility with other service members that is unique in its own right, one that enables an in-depth and personal understanding of the causes for the additional stresses that new veterans may be suffering as they leave the military. In this way, VSAV is building on the lessons learned in the hugely successful addiction model created by Alcoholics Anonymous.

The Peer Advisors will be salaried employees, and will be trained and certified by the VSAV psychological and medical teams to work with, train, and support the Community Facilitators in their engagements with new veterans that are relocating or returning to their local community.

VSAV Community Facilitators

As described above, VSAV’s program will create an interactive infrastructure between new and established veterans that facilitates direct contact between those who need transition support in a given geography and those already situated there. Veterans’ organizations cover the country and their members are highly motivated to provide ready points-of-

ALAN WEST

“As a 22-year Army Veteran who served in Operations Desert Storm and Iraqi Freedom, and as a Civilian Advisor to the Afghan Army in Operation Enduring Freedom, I understand both the gravity of giving the order, and the challenge of carrying it out.”



contacts for community support. Volunteers from among these organizations who meet VSAV's service qualifications will be selected as "Community Facilitators" and trained by VSAV in programs to both educate the community and provide assistance to the new veterans (and their families) who are relocating or returning there. Interestingly, it is well documented that volunteering in this way also benefits the facilitators themselves by providing a heightened sense of purpose in "doing for others" reflecting their own personal commitment to the brotherhood of all veterans.

The goal of the Community Facilitator is to communicate directly and indirectly with each new veteran and his/her family locating into that community to provide local introductions and support for their transitions into the civilian world. In so doing, the Community Facilitators will have the unique opportunity to get to know the new veterans and their families. They will also be in position to assist any who may ask for (or show signs of needing) advanced interactions with VSAV's Peer Advisors and local mental health providers. This effort has the potential to be strongly effective because of the positive and consistent relationship grounded in the mutual respect and overall shared experiences that exists between all service members. The Community Facilitators are the "heart" of the VSAV organization and will be screened and specifically trained by VSAV to provide effective support for all veterans and their families that live in, or move into, their local communities.

Qualifications for consideration to be a VSAV Community Facilitator include:

- A U.S. Military Veteran with an honorable discharge from the military (applicants will be required to submit form DD214 for verification),
- Currently not under any legal or criminal investigation, nor charged with any felony conviction since discharge,
- Able to demonstrate basic intelligence standards via formal psychological testing, be able to read and write English and speak clearly on the telephone,
- Able to provide a letter of recommendation from one or more other veterans as to the motivation and

character appropriate for serving new veterans,

- Willing and able to access a computer to attend online training and to engage in phone interviews with VSAV management for initial qualification as well as for ongoing quality control and feedback, and
- Willing and able to attend annual or biannual training and/or recertification meetings.

VSAV is highly qualified to mobilize established veterans in this effort due to management's history of active involvement with local chapters of veterans' organizations around the country (e.g., the Special Forces Association). Those relationships, in conjunction with the experience in managing the military's most comprehensive educational and training operations, provides the knowledge and credibility to attract, qualify, train, and manage volunteers veterans from local chapters throughout the country.

The VSAV HQ

VSAV will establish a tightly coordinated headquarters team to provide online and telecommunications resources for direct voice support, email communications, and social networking among veterans. This "network hub" team will also build a database of the various resources that are available to newly transitioning veterans and provide telephone and email support in identifying and accessing such services as appropriate. VSAV will actively promote its resources through the military Retirement Centers located on various bases and at VA facilities around the country. Once a transitioning service member has been identified, the HQ team will establish contact and provide an introduction to an appropriate Community Facilitator. The process of facilitating the transition of the service member will be monitored to insure uninterrupted support and provide quality control for current and future interactions.

A particularly unique aspect of this powerful VSAV program is its potential to also be highly cost effective. Given the extraordinary ability of the program to reach into every corner of the country, and the comprehensive access to services for new veterans and their families that the VSAV program will provide through its Peer Advisors and Community Facilitators, it would be natural to predict a high cost of operations. The



WHEN THEIR SERVICE ENDS.
Ours Begins...

most significant strength of the VSAV program is that it is built on the remarkable lifelong commitment made by veterans to their country and to the brotherhood of all veterans. Support of new veterans by veterans already established in local communities will be on a completely voluntary basis with no compensation other than the much-desired outcome of knowing that the Community Facilitator has helped a new veteran, his family, the local community, and the nation by providing the ongoing services to new veterans that the VSAV program will enable them to provide. As a result, costs of operation are expected to be significantly lower than those associated with programs that provide access to other medical-related markets and services.

**ON THE OTHER HAND, THE BENEFITS FOR OUR VETERANS
AND OUR COUNTRY WILL BE NEVER-ENDING.**

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VSAV STATUS

An application is being processed for tax exemption as a "charitable organization" under Section 501(c)3 of the Internal Revenue Code

VSAV FOUNDERS

VSAV has been organized by veterans and supporters who have both unique experiences and a special dedication to supporting those who have made a lifelong commitment to this country

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