

**JOINT TASK FORCE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS  
FINAL REPORT  
October 2009**

## **Introduction**

Since the arrival of U.S. Armed Forces in Iraq and Afghanistan, the number of life-threatening injuries to servicemen and women has increased exponentially, as well as the number of mental health disorders among active-duty personnel and veterans, including posttraumatic stress disorder, substance abuse, mood disorders, and other forms of anxiety disorders. This situation has increased the demands on social workers as they seek to provide quality services to active-duty personnel, recent veterans, and their families, and on educators preparing the next generation of social workers to meet these substantial challenges.

To address the needs of the profession and the military community, the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE)—in partnership with the Association of Baccalaureate Social Work Program Directors (BPD), the Group for the Advancement of Doctoral Education in Social Work (GADE), the National Association of Social Work Deans and Directors (NADD), and the St. Louis Group (SLG)—established the Joint Task Force on Veterans Affairs in 2008. The task force sought to (1) examine relevant social work educational issues relating to veterans, (2) determine how these issues could be addressed, (3) develop appropriate responses to these issues, and (4) seek appropriate legislative support for policy and educational opportunities that recognize the fundamental life challenges confronting past and present military members and their families. The task force formed four working groups to examine these areas in depth and developed the recommendations presented in this report.

## **Recommendations**

### **1. Social Work Education**

- **Overall curriculum goals should strive to build the capacity of social work professionals to effectively work with veterans and their families.** This task involves encouraging social workers to work in military settings and those that involve veterans; raising awareness of behavioral and physical health issues of returning veterans; applying social work concepts, principles, and theories to those affected by war and terrorism; fostering an understanding of diversity, including that within military culture; improving technological skills so as to best employ military databases and other information systems; and attending to the ethical challenges that social workers may have regarding military policies or military–civilian conflicts.
- **At the baccalaureate level, attention to the preparation of generalist social workers who will work in remote settings is particularly crucial.** Those in entry-level professional practice in rural, isolated settings or those without military resources or Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) services must be equipped to provide effective assistance to returning veterans and their families.
- **At the master's level, military-related content should be incorporated into social policy, human behavior and social environment (HBSE), and fieldwork, and/or a complete concentration developed.** Foundation and 2nd-year courses are suited to material on military culture; this also should be included in the preparation of future administrators of programs that serve military members and veterans in areas such as mental health, housing, and employment.
- **At the doctoral level, dissertation and general research on military social work and veterans' services supported by academic institutions, private foundations, and**

**governmental agencies should be fostered.** As graduates from PhD-level social work programs assume positions in government, nonprofit research institutes, or other nonacademic settings, the opportunity to substantially expand the knowledge base of clinical social work practice in the military context is clear.

## 2. Research and Assessment

The following research questions were identified as appropriate to understanding the scope of social work education already focused on veterans and the military:

- To what extent are social work education programs preparing social work students to assist veterans in pursuing educational and career opportunities?
- To what extent are social work educators consulting with the Department of Defense (DOD), VA, and civilian providers to identify and promote evidence-based practices associated with successful transition of service members from the military services and the coping and recovery of veterans hampered by mental health problems?

## 3. Family Behavioral Health

- **Raise awareness of the multifaceted needs of veteran families.** As the families of returning service members face a complex situation of the veteran's needs, their own experiences of wartime and military life, and a larger societal estrangement from their issues, social work professionals must attend to providing a comprehensive understanding of these matters. The social work educational programs are well positioned to educate future generations of social workers to serve these individuals effectively.
- **Convey specific practice knowledge within social work programs.** To work effectively with this population, social work professionals must have a thorough and up-to-date understanding of the demographics of recent veterans, as well as military culture and specific issues within it such as diversity, the impact of family separations, sexual harassment, and sexual assault.
- **Address assessment protocols within agencies.** As community agencies assume a wider role in providing mental health and social services to returning veterans and their families, information-gathering processes must be examined to ensure that a complete and accurate picture of veterans and their families is captured and subsequently reflected in support services. Assessments should be strengths-based. Community agencies should contact and work with the Department of Defense (DOD) or Veterans Health Administration (VHA) agencies to learn their evidence-based and intervention protocols that may be effectively adapted for the community level interventions.

## 4. Collaborative Partnership and Advocacy

- **Advocate for legislative initiatives that transcend organizational boundaries.** This effort addresses the needs of active-duty personnel, recent veterans, and their families through a wide spectrum of federal and local agencies, nonprofit organizations, and higher education institutions, and attends to issues such as the dearth of social workers qualified to handle veterans' services in rural and isolated areas.
- **Partner with organizations to provide social work education that attends to biopsychosocial issues of active-duty personnel, recent veterans, and their families.** This effort involves partnering with VA facilities and other entities to prepare social work students and social work professionals to understand issues of military culture and veterans' circumstances that may include personal and medical challenges

as well as issues of race, ethnicity, and gender. This initiative would also support students in acquiring a thorough knowledge of veterans' resources within the DOD, VA, and other agencies.

- **Facilitate the entry of recent veterans and their family members into social work education programs.** This effort involves attending to administrative matters such as establishing memoranda of understanding among higher education institutions, community colleges, and military facilities to assist enrollment of military personnel who have earned an associate degree or are taking courses toward a postsecondary degree at military facilities. In addition, outreach to veterans is needed that focuses on the unique contributions that these individuals can make to the social work profession and other veterans. Also crucial is creating a campus climate conducive and welcoming to veterans and their families. This may include appointing a veterans' adviser, addressing the effective delivery of financial aid and support services, and establishing veterans' student organizations.
- **Urge NASW to add members of the military, veterans, and their families to its specialty practice credentialing program.**
- **Foster ties with community agencies to help prepare social workers for working with veterans, raise awareness of veteran issues, and examine policies pertaining to veterans.** This initiative suggests that in their work with community agencies as well as with local and state governments, social work programs urge specific funding for the preparation of social workers to work with veterans and their families. In addition, these partnerships can foster the effective delivery of agency and social work services to veterans and their families and serve an advocacy function for legislative scrutiny of current veteran policies.

### CSWE-Specific Recommendations

The following recommendations are specific to CSWE and its educational partners:

- **Add a section to its Web site** that lists resources pertaining to teaching and working with active-duty military members, veterans, and their families.
- **Encourage member institutions to link** with professional organizations, state entities and initiatives, and nonprofit and faith-based groups that are serving the needs of returning veterans and their families.
- **Identify and join with other social work education and practice groups that have a common interest in quality-of-life issues for veterans.** This effort includes reaching out to organizations that may not have previously considered their roles as social work providers and providing information to these groups on the unique situation of individuals returning from combat zones.
- **Convene a work group to develop a statement of advanced practice behaviors for MSW concentrations in military social work.** This is a further development of the 2008 Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (2008 EPAS) for educational programs at the advanced or concentration level and parallels similar development in other area of advanced practice.
- Continue to **host an open forum** during its Annual Program Meeting so that those interested and involved in teaching and working with military personnel, veterans, and their families will have a regular venue for focused discussion of continuing issues.

## **Implementation**

The recommendations of the Task force will be reviewed by the CSWE Office of Social Work Research and an implementation plan developed that encompasses current and projected actions on the part of the various partners represented on the Task Force. Other Task Force participant organizations will review the Report and its recommendations and a collaborative implementation plan will be developed. This plan, along with an update of current activities in progress will be reviewed and approved by the CSWE Board of Directors at its November 2009 meeting in San Antonio, Texas.

Importantly, and in addition, the Report will be shared with other organizations having a stakeholder interest in the social work education response to veterans' issues, that is, Congressional Offices, Department of Veterans Affairs, the Association of VA Social Workers (AVASW), and the Friends of VA Medical Care and Health Research Coalition (FOVA). This is viewed by the task force as forming a base for continuing and extending the dialogue and discussion to a broader group of professionals and interested stakeholders engaged in service to the active-duty military and veterans.

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