

## Healing the Trauma of War

At MHA, we have watched with grave concern as more and more information has emerged about the serious difficulties facing soldiers and their families and the over-stretched military systems of care. In Hawai`i, for example:

- 54 year old ex-Air Force man, Robert Roth, leapt to his death from the 10<sup>th</sup> floor of Tripler Hospital in January 2007 after being unable to obtain mental health services for his bipolar disorder and long history of depression.
- On Kamehameha Day 2007 on the Big Island, a member of the Army National Guard who had recently returned from Iraq stabbed his estranged, pregnant wife, killing their unborn child, and then stabbed and killed his 14-year-old son Tyrann who tried to intervene.
- In June 2009, MHA received a frantic call from a teacher in an elementary school located on a military base. She said their classrooms have become unmanageable, filled with scores of children with severe behavior disorders, primarily related to parents' being deployed or problems when they return. Although the school receives a weekly visit from a mental health team, "it's not enough," and the teachers feel that they and the children are being abandoned without adequate resources.

Record rates of suicide and homicide, mental health and substance abuse problems, domestic violence and marital conflict, work and financial troubles, emotional problems in children, consequences of sexual trauma among female soldiers, traumatic brain injury, need for social support, and homelessness – these are the issues that are surfacing.

MHA is launching an effort to enable Hawai`i, as a state with a significant military presence, to come together as a community to determine how we can increase the support available to our returning military, their spouses, and their children.

The purpose of MHA's "Healing the Trauma of War" project is twofold:

- to identify the unmet needs specifically of returning National Guard/Reserves, their spouses, and their children, and develop and implement an action plan to address those needs; and
- to hold town hall meetings that convene the public, the military, and others (schools, employers, providers, policymakers) to discuss how we as a community can come together to help solve some of the problems facing our soldiers and their families.

A quick glance at some of the more critical concerns of soldiers and their families:

- The suicide rate among soldiers in 2008 was the highest rate since the Army began tracking suicides three decades ago (CNN, 2/5/09), and this year the numbers are looking even worse. "This is terrifying," an Army official said. "We do not know what is going on."<sup>i</sup>
- Homicides by active-duty military personnel and new veterans for the six years before and after the invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 increased by 89 percent during the current wartime period, about three-quarters of which involved Iraq and Afghanistan war veterans. About one-third of the victims were family members.<sup>ii</sup>
- More than one-third of Iraq and Afghanistan war veterans enrolled in the V.A. health system received a diagnosis of a mental health problem, most often post-traumatic stress disorder or depression, and the number of veterans with mental health problems rose steadily the longer they were out of the service.<sup>iii</sup>
- Children of U.S. military troops sought outpatient mental health care 2 million times last year, double the number at the start of the Iraq war, and there was also an alarming spike in the number of military kids actually hospitalized for mental health reasons.<sup>iv</sup>
- Children with parents deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan age 18 months to five years are more likely to have behavioral problems than children whose parents aren't deployed. Nationwide, over two million children have deployed parents.<sup>v</sup>
- Thirty-nine percent of returning vets say they are reluctant to use military or veteran-specific services for help with PTSD and related problems.<sup>vi</sup>
- Sixty percent of returning soldiers said family relationships changed after deployment, i.e., breakdowns in communication (29%), frequent arguments and conflicts (24%), and lack of sexual intimacy (21%). Nearly half experienced an increase in conflicts and arguments (verbal and/or physical) at home after returning.<sup>vii</sup>
- The number of female service members who have become homeless after leaving the military has jumped dramatically in recent years.<sup>viii</sup>
- About one out of seven female veterans of Afghanistan or Iraq – 15% -- who visit a V.A. center for medical care report having been sexually assaulted or harassed during military duty, and more than half of these women have post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).<sup>ix</sup>

- The V.A. also found that 22 percent of women diagnosed with PTSD suffered from "military sexual trauma," which includes sexual harassment or assault, compared with 1 percent of men.<sup>x</sup>
- Military doctors estimate that 10 percent to 20 percent of soldiers sent to Iraq or Afghanistan suffer a Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI). Symptoms include excessive sleepiness, inattention, difficulty concentrating, impaired memory, faulty judgment, depression, irritability, emotional outbursts, disturbed sleep, diminished libido, difficulty switching between two tasks, and slowed thinking, and it can take some soldiers a significant period of time to realize how severely they've been affected.<sup>xi</sup>
- The number of soldiers seeking help for substance abuse has climbed 25% in the past five years, but the Army's counseling program has remained significantly understaffed and struggles to meet the demand, according to Army records.<sup>xii</sup>

If you'd like to get involved in this effort to explore how we, as a community, can increase support for our returning soldiers and their families, please call our office, 521 1846 or email [marya@mentalhealth-hi.org](mailto:marya@mentalhealth-hi.org).

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<sup>i</sup> CNN, 6/11/09

<sup>ii</sup> *New York Times*, 1/13/08

<sup>iii</sup> *New York Times*, 7/17/09

<sup>iv</sup> Associated Press, 7/7/09

<sup>v</sup> 11/08, *Archives of Pediatrics & Adolescent Medicine*

<sup>vi</sup> 10/24/08, Congressional Issue Briefing by Witness Justice, Veterans Initiative Center and Research Institute, in collaboration with bipartisan U.S. House Caucuses

<sup>vii</sup> *Ibid.*, Congressional Issue Briefing

<sup>viii</sup> *Boston Globe*, 6/6/09

<sup>ix</sup> *USA Today*, 10/28/08

<sup>x</sup> CNN, 3/18/08

<sup>xi</sup> Associated Press, *USA Today*, 4/9/09

<sup>xii</sup> *USA Today*, 11/21/08